

READING CONTINGENCIES:
MARIAN FIGURATION IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

By

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This study examines four Middle English literary texts and one medical text in light of a body of medieval Marian figuration. The texts that comprise Marian devotion in the Middle Ages provide one frame for investigating how medieval Christianity constructed itself discursively. As a paradoxical harmony of spirit and body, Mary inhabits a unique position. Her virgin body is nevertheless divided, continuously opened and closed, by the various learned and popular discourses that attempt to gain it and themselves final significance. Mary's typological relationship to Eve provides one way to investigate this network of texts, bodies, and cultural histories, for in this narrative

design, the body of each woman must be divided by the other and made subject to linguistic and exemplary confusion.

The dissertation pursues the effects of this divisiveness in the literary texts, contending that an investigation of it foregrounds the multiplicity founding the seeming unity behind medieval Christianity. Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale and the hagiographical Seinte Marherete are heavily invested in maintaining this unity, and yet their figurative language both authorizes and jeopardizes the dominant ideologies of Christian virtue. In contrast, Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale and Prologue and the anonymous Pearl are more self-reflexive, offering insight into both the limits and the possibilities of figuration.

This doubled nature of figuration arises largely from a narrativized errancy of female physiology, emanating from the period's theories concerning the Fall in the garden. Each chapter of the dissertation, using a particular facet of Marian figuration, studies the status of the female body as originary of the narrative of salvation. In pursuing traces of Mary's figured body, the dissertation undertakes an investigation into how the medieval church and its believers made meaning and inscribed, for themselves, the truth of God on feminine flesh.

INTRODUCTION
READING CONTINGENCIES: DISCIPLINARY AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Ainsinc va des contreres choses,
les unes sunt des autres gloses;
et qui l'une an veust defenir,
de l'autre li doit souvenir,
ou ja, par nule antancion,
n'i metra diffinicion;
car qui des .II. n'a connoissance,
ja n'i connoistra differance,
san quoi ne peut venir en place
diffinicion que l'an face.¹

Jean de Meun, Le Roman de la Rose, 21543-52

Christianity is doubtless the most refined symbolic construct in which femininity . . . is focused on *Maternity*. Let us call "maternal" the ambivalent principle that is bound to the species, on the one hand, and on the other stems from an identity catastrophe that causes the Name to topple over into the unnameable that one imagines as femininity, non-language or body.

Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," 161-62

As medieval scholars continue to negotiate changes in literary theory, oftentimes battle lines become firmly

¹"Thus things go by contraries; one is the gloss of the other. If one wants to define one of the pair, he must remember the other, or he will never, by any intention, assign a definition to it; for he who has no understanding of the two will never understand the difference between them, and without this difference no definition that one may make can come to anything." Translation is by Dahlberg (351).

entrenched. Like the soldiers of the God of Love battling the protectors of the Rose in Jean de Meun's allegory, the post-structuralists, deconstructionists, and psychoanalysts entrench themselves in a siege on the bastions of the past, held firm by the historians, philologists, and other like traditionalists. Yet even as the battle rages, one begins to wonder what exactly is being fought over and protected. Like Jean's allegory of the Rose which is both so explicit that the work was widely read as a pornographic text and yet also relies so heavily on its objectification that the metaphor falls apart, what is at stake in the battle over Medieval Studies is both a tangible and historical foundation of ideas and a more evanescent investigation into the interrelatedness of present-day and past ways of thinking. As I undertake this project, I step into this psychomachia that rages within the intellectual framework of Medieval Studies.

But similar to what Jean's words above indicate about comprehending things by their contraries, certainly the hostilities within critical circles illustrate this recursive process even as many medievalists in any camp would deny their reliance on other groups. Jean's quotation can also be understood to remark upon the relation between past and present. If there is any truth to Jean's words from this perspective, then, we see that understanding some of

our present reading practices will necessarily involve retrospective analysis of previous modes of knowledge and representation. I do not pretend in this project to undertake the task of an historical or historiographical description of Medieval Studies as this branch of knowledge has developed into what it is presently. However, the contentions within the field right now provide a revealing analogy to practices in the Middle Ages, practices by which a culture constructed itself discursively.

One of these practices is the period's development of the the Holy Virgin Mary's life story. The notion of the interrelatedness between past and present rings multiply true for this unique character whose death was made into an element of eschatology before her birth became a topic of disputation. Questions surrounding her birth were decided before those concerning her conception. Her story is one that began with her bodily end. Significantly the sexual connotation that may be called up in such a statement would have had consequential currency in the Middle Ages. Mary's "tale" was intimately tied to her "tayle" for she was defined and comprehended via the memory of her opposite, Eve. In portions of the N-Town cycle, dramas designed to teach about the holy family and various tenets of Christian faith, Mary is treated like any other young woman who has

become pregnant outside of wedlock. Several detractors comment on her apparent promiscuity:

Such a 3onge damesel of bewté bryght
 And of schap so comely also
 Of hire tayle ofte-tyme be lyght
 And rygh tekyl vndyr þe too. ("The Trial of Joseph and Mary," lines 94-97)²

[Such a young damsel of beauty bright and of shape so comely also, of her tail oftentimes be light and right ticklish under you, too.]

The sexual overtones of this passage indicate that Mary was the heir of cultural attitudes about women and their originally sinful mother, Eve. Even if only to be dramatically disproved later, this passage effectively sexualizes the Virgin and puts her sexuality outside the bounds of propriety and into the prurient, specular arena. Only against this backdrop of the expectation of sin can the miracle of the Virgin's pregnant body hold its full salvational significance. As the play uses the technique of reversal to instruct its audience, so the church turned the story of Mary into doctrine by playing her exceptional characteristics off against the typically, perhaps stereotypically, negative perceptions of female sexuality. In Reading Contingencies, I investigate the relationship between such figurations of the church and the female body,

²This and all subsequent references to the N-Town cycle are to Spector's edition.

specifically Mary's and Eve's bodies, as a way to understand the fictional foundations of Christianity.

My work is based on reading historical and literary texts but is also indebted to recent work in post-structuralist theories of language, subjectivity, and gender proposed by literary theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler. Bringing such theories to bear upon texts of Marian devotion has afforded me a unique opportunity for investigating the cultural matrix that Mary represents. For instance, Marina Warner's Alone of All Her Sex, modern though it is, indicates the diversity of influences that comprise the history of the Virgin. How to understand this diversity as the foundation of a faith ostensibly predicated on the unity of the godhead became a central concern for me. Post-structural theory has allowed me to begin to unravel the idiosyncracies of some of this diversity and more specifically of Marian figuration. Indeed, this project has allowed me to understand figuration itself as idiosyncratic. Even more basically, this project struggles to understand how Mary's body and the female body itself provide the palimpsest of medieval Christian faith. What must be clarified within this conglomeration is the difference between a ubiquitous cultural matrix that might be labeled by "Marian Figuration" and the specific

characteristics of its application in a particular work of art.

Various thinkers and theologians including Bede, Alcuin, Pope Gregory the Great, Augustine of Canterbury, Richard of Saint Lawrence, Thomas Aquinas, Gratian, and Hugh of Saint Victor dealt with the exceptional quality of Mary's body and the particular place it must hold in human society, law, and convention. As the history of a mother in Judea turned into a story of a miraculous Virgin and the Queen of Heaven, the church solidified its position on certain tenets of faith and the social behaviors extrapolated from them. Yet, as we will see most particularly in Chapter One, Mary's typological connection to Eve returns in these figurations in such a way that it undermines the narrative closure necessitated by the church's ethic of transcendence. Even as Mary transcends the concupiscence of conception, the pain of childbirth, and the fear of death, at each moment where her exceptional nature is based upon an opposition to the errancy of Eve's flesh--that is, Woman's flesh--the Logos is divided. This divisiveness is part of the process of figuration itself, the only process by which it is possible to speak of the transcendence of the Logos as I argue in Chapter One on Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale and the productive, divisive effects of telling tales.

In the tropologies of the Christian tradition, Mary's relationship to Eve is central for two interrelated reasons. The traditional misogynistic reading of Genesis provides the basis of the Augustinian model of semiotics--a model of language that informs medieval poetics as much as it does theology. This system connects Eve with metaphor itself, the loss of direct access to things in themselves necessitating the mediacy of language as the condition of a post-lapsarian existence. The era believed Eve's sin to be intimately connected to misrepresentation and misreading. The Pauline woman, commanded to save herself through procreation and modest attire,³ inherits the recuperated repercussions of Eve's ancillary existence and misinterpretations in the garden. Against this backdrop of natural, social, and rhetorical categories--produced by it--Mary rights humanity and redeems femininity. Mary turns the sinful body of "Eva" into the prayer of blessing, "Ave." This graphic boustrophedon⁴--employing reflection and comparison or ratio, paradigmatic of metaphoricity itself--embodies not only a poetics but also the very ontology and epistemology

³See 1 Timothy 2:9-15.

⁴A method of writing in which the lines are inscribed alternately from right to left and from left to right; derived from the pattern of the turning of the oxen at the end of a plowed row.

that Jean describes throughout his portion of Le Roman and that comprises the foundation of medieval Christianity.

The yoking of opposites, necessarily turning both away from and towards each other in this way, provides the era with a way to talk about and conceptualize the Christian ethic of transcendence. Yet, the yoking of Eve and Mary illustrates the figural existence of this ethic and its dependence on a belief in the errancy of female physiology. The condition of this ethic as both assumed and contentious underlies my interest in the Eve/Mary figuration and provides the main focus for my investigations. In my investigation of this figuration and its uses, I undertake to discover what Julia Kristeva, in "Revolution in Poetic Language," calls thetic breaks (pages 98-110), or those places where a lapse in the signifying system occurs. These breaks are, at base, revealing because "positionality . . . is structured as a break in the signifying process, establishing the identification of the subject and its object as preconditions of propositionality" (98). Such breaks, then, throw into question the absoluteness of transcendence by allowing readers to investigate the semiotic processes that produce the idea of transcendence, the identity of the church and the faithful. The Eve/Mary trope constitutes such a break because it so effectively

illustrates both the propositions of the church and their semiotic inheritance: the re-turn to propriety that Mary instigates must always be in response to the turning away from the same that Eve represents. In other words, Mary is responsible for returning humanity to its rightful inheritance only by being responsible to the errancy of Eve.

In looking at the consequences of such figuration, the project also inquires into the powers of narrative to form the truths held by the church as self-evident. Inherently, the church is a normalizing institution. The Christian narrative effectively naturalizes categories of gender, relation to life and death, social class and class markers, ethnic identity, and rhetorical practices. Using my investigations into various facets of Marian figuration as an interpretative tool, I examine several medieval literary texts and one medical text to investigate how the tensions of faith and figuration emerge in the popular and secular imagination. Doing so allows me to address both the effect of figuration--the often formulaic literature of faith--and the semiotic processes that produce such an ostensibly transparent mode of representation.

The literary texts I have chosen are various and variously framed by the history of their composition and reception. Each foregrounds a different portion of the

semiotic process of Marian figuration. Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale provides the opportunity to study connections between narrative, death, and propriety while The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale illustrate the powerfully interdependent relationship between bodies and (pre)texts and where each exceeds the other. The Middle English Seinte Marharete, found in two manuscripts dating from early in the thirteenth century, uses the metaphor of virgin motherhood, a trope with much currency in medieval Christianity, to reproduce faith. Finally, the interdependence of faith and matter, of Word and flesh, God and mother, provides me with a frame for investigating the effects of the formal and metonymic qualities of Pearl in making God apprehensible to the earthbound.

Mary's relation to law and death provides the focus for my reading of Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale in which the heroine's death is told over and over again and yet never occurs. In "Shadows of the Law: Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale, Exemplarity and Narrativity," I begin by providing a framework for understanding the reinscriptions, fulfillments, and substitutions that produce Mary's death as exemplary of narrative design moving towards a teleological, indeed eschatological, conclusion. Building on the ideas of such theorists as Elisabeth Bronfen, Jacques Derrida, and Herbert Marcuse, I investigate the public and social uses of

the possibilities of Mary's death. Her body is a fallen body--and must be if the Incarnation is to signify for humanity's salvation at all--yet her death is not a given in the church's systemic rhetoric. In fact, her death story grows with time. Even as it takes on miraculous qualities, it takes on more and more of a normalizing function as it becomes enmeshed in the Christian narrative of eternal salvation. Through her death, Mary is made to exemplify the ethic of transcendence and Christian values, while her body simultaneously becomes a necessary vehicle of this narrative procedure.

Like Mary's death story, told again and again, Constance's death recurs throughout the Man of Law's narration even though this heroine never dies. The potential for her death is one basis upon which the story works to sustain its sense of propriety in such matters as religious devotion, marriage, and relation to one's society. Yet, the constant re-narration of Constance's death, I argue, illustrates the evanescent quality of the bulwark that sustains such propriety. In the same way that Mary's death legitimates the Christian narrative while also ultimately

¹Reading various apocryphal stories of the Virgin's Assumption into Heaven or her Dormition will show that the later the text the shorter the amount of time it took for her soul and/or her son to return from heaven to claim her body.

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confounding its closure, Constance's death(story) exemplifies and shadows the Man of Law's faith. This Man of Law's story of a woman is explicitly concerned with the question of law, and yet the repeated narration and deferral of her death brings into question the precedent-based process of making law. The process of providing examples to support a thesis not only provides such support but also as a type of trope, illustrates the errancy of this necessary figurative language and the infinite possibility of iteration and of rhetorical and cultural contexts without absolute anchor." The Man of Law's logic of repetition becomes a shadow that darkens and permeates the narratively inscribed boundaries of Christianity and the narrator's sense of propriety. Thus, it is no wonder that Constance cannot be differentiated from her ghosts, the ghosts of the telling of her story. In this tale, the exemplary ghost that Constance must always constitute is the shadowy rhetorical strategy by which the Man of Law attempts to control his world.

Repetition, often self-aware and self-contradictory, provides the main investigative focus of my reading of The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale. In this second chapter, "Texts and Pretexts: The Marian Inflection in Chaucer's

See Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," 1-21.

Alisoun of Bath," the relationship between texts and bodies is thrown into question by the Wife's intertextual life story. Even though this tale is remarkable for not mentioning the Holy Virgin's name, the stories of Mary and Alisoun nevertheless parallel in some revealing ways. Just as Mary represented a unique coincidence of flesh and spirit, human law and divine law, body and word, the coincidence of texts that constitutes the character "The Wife of Bath" calls to mind the discursive processes used by a society to describe itself and its members.

Additionally, I argue that the confusion and contradiction apparent in the Wife's prologue suggest a parodic strategy of self-definition. My reading is based in part on the idea of performativity as posited by Judith Butler in Gender Trouble. I argue that the character of Alisoun is designed to show a marked awareness of contradictory roles that texts representative of mainstream culture and values call on her to perform. Several times she reminds her audience that her "entente nys but for to pleye" (Fragment 2.Line 192), calling readers' attention to her performance and what might or might not be the difference between a serious life story and a staged, played-out one. Yet at each moment, her narration suggests the force and

¹This and all subsequent references to Chaucerian texts are to Benson's edition.

efficacy of even a mimed or staged repetition of various discourses. Such decontextualizing works on both the plot level, that is, on the level of this character's stated intention, and on the meta-textual level to destabilize categories of gender. Her prologue and tale suggest polyvalent categories of gender by repeating and varying standard, normative discourses of gender. In this way her tale enters into social debate.

The idea of Mary's perpetual virginity and simultaneous motherhood similarly pressures categories of existence and morality. "Dispersing Faith: Seinte Marharete, Maternal Bodies, and Telling Stories," the third chapter, uses the paradox of the virgin mother to investigate the reproduction of faith. Part of Saint Margaret's story is her surviving being eaten by a dragon while imprisoned. Before being swallowed she makes the sign of the cross over her virgin body. The dragon's stomach bursts open and the saint walks out unscathed. This plot element connected to medieval representations of birth--most specifically Caesarean birth--and during the period this virgin martyr was held as a patroness of childbirth. Like all hagiographies, this thirteenth-century Middle English version of Margaret's life appropriates the pain of a character to the reproduction of faith. Calling on Margaret's name during childbirth also calls on the power of God to protect the woman from pain and

the child from the threat of being "misbilimet" or deformed (49).

Yet, Margaret's story is still about pain and it was used in times of parturitive threat. The processes of substitution that produce her story as exemplary of parturition suggest a constant reemergence of fleshiness in the figurations that reproduce faith. I bring to bear upon this investigation of bodies, the text of the Middle English redaction of the De passionibus mulierum curandarum, or the English Trotula, which provides insight into common, vernacular practice and presuppositions about women's bodies. Additionally this chapter builds upon the theoretical base of Elaine Scarry's The Body in Pain and her ideas of "world-making" through pain to investigate the liminality of the reproductive and specifically the maternal body and the ways it divides and legitimizes Christian faith. Ultimately this chapter posits the idea that Seinte Marharete does two things simultaneously. It does what Gayle Margherita argues about hagiography in general: "it represents the sacrifice of the feminine or feminized body that enables the transcendence of the logos, or, in Lacanian terms, of the paternal metaphor" (page 43). Yet, the intertextuality of her story and its use in a parturitive arena suggest that "Margaret's body" and physiology in

general exist also somewhere outside (intersections of) discourse.

Finally, the interdependence of faith and matter, of Word and flesh, of God and mother, provides me with a frame for investigating the effects of the repetition and formal qualities of Pearl in making God apprehensible to the earthbound. In this final chapter, I argue that underlying the obvious logic of metaphor the poem uses, there is a concomitant logic of metonymy. The poem teaches its readers to look for this metonymy, which is also a logic of contiguity, and to understand it as predicative of the Christian logic of dualism that would set soul and body at odds. Pearl uses changes to and varied perspectives on the eponymous jewel to instruct readers about the powers of repetition, even when the repetition seems unified. The recapitulative form of the poem, reflecting the perfect roundness of the pearl itself, the hundreds of pearls and pearl maidens that suffuse the poem, and the ultimate view of the New Jerusalem, reflecting so closely the ultimate biblical vision of heaven in Revelations, all indicate a belief in the plenitude of heaven and a human metaphorical relation to it. In the same way that Mary was bodily assumed into heaven to be its queen, perfect in body and soul, the Pearl maiden reigns in heaven as "quene by cortaysye" (line

468),¹⁸ "wemlez" or "immaculate" (737). But the chapter also investigates ways in which the sublation of Mary remains incomplete and the ways in which the character of the Pearl maiden builds upon this errancy. As the poem comes to rely more and more heavily on the image of the pearl in representing the ineffable, the pearl remains immaculate and regal, but with shifts in context the image changes. The chapter focuses on some of these shifts as a way to investigate the poem's presentation of differences within discursively constructed categories of the same. In this way, the chapter provides some insight into the poem's self-reflexive awareness of the limits of metaphorical categorization in representing the plenitude of heaven.

Such a reflexive attitude marks both Pearl and The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, whereas the Man of Law and Teochimus, the narrator of Seinte Marherete, present tales much more invested in maintaining dominant ideologies of Christian virtue. As the research alternates between investigations of texts that are markedly self-reflexive and those that are less so, it provides various avenues for understanding the intricate nature of the relationship between texts and bodies. Using the Mary/Eve binary, all the chapters in some way focus on discursive boundaries and

¹⁸This and all further citations are from Andrew & Waldron's edition.

expectations of bodies. In this exploration of the cultural construction of bodies, the project highlights certain issues that seem always to have been defining points in culture. My reading of the Man of Law's Tale focuses on the social employment of death while I argue that Alisoun of Bath's diatribes against and simultaneous embodiment of certain anti-feminist commonplaces emphasize the semiotics of sexuality. Similarly, Seinte Mareherte is concerned with maternity and Pearl with the potential and pitfalls of figuration itself as embodiment.

By examining texts that profess respect for the dominant ideologies and those that overtly challenge it, Reading Contingencies is situated in such a way that it can provide insight into discourses that we take for granted about the period, that dominate our understanding and seemed to have a similar effect on readers of the Middle Ages. At the same time it provides a way to understand the limits of those discourses. Its focus on gender and figuration foregrounds what Teresa de Lauretis calls in Technologies of Gender "the constant slippage between Woman as representation, as the object and very condition of representation, and . . . women as historical beings" (10). The practice of reading for the cooperation and tensions between these poles, and the practice of reading the contingencies of a culture on a larger scale, opens a space

within theology and ideology. By refusing to allow the semiotic processes of culture to be repressed, this space confronts the idea of truth as a form external to specific moments in history, particular applications of language, and singular conglomerations of flesh and subjectivity. By reading the contingencies of culture in this way, my project enters into social debate and indicates for its readers practices for reading their own position within the truths of their cultures.

CHAPTER ONE
SHADOWS OF THE LAW:
CHAUCER'S MAN OF LAW'S TALE,
EXEMPLARITY AND NARRATIVITY

Part of the Christian context of the Man of Law's story of Constance is the body of Marian imagery so popular in the Middle Ages. Mary is never far away in this story of a woman's trials and triumphs. Constance suffers forced marriages, murders of friends, and attempted rape but ultimately triumphs in her faith, converting others along the way. She lives up to her name in all ways: she is constant in her devotion to her god, steady in her emotions, and faithful to the people in her life. This behavior is one way that she is like the Holy Virgin Mary, the ultimate example of female virtue in the period.

But the parallels between the two women run deeper--on the level of narrative strategy--in a way that can call to our attention some disturbing implications of the exemplary mode. As it presents an example of ideal behavior, The Man of Law's Tale represents Constance, as well as her mothers-in-law, through metaphors of death. The ghosts of these women reveal the limits of the Man of Law's precedent-based

narrative strategy in controlling its world. H. Marshall Leicester describes a similar process in Troilus and Criseyde, saying that text "mimes a certain sort of discourse in such a way as to bring out the assumptions that make it possible and to question them" (17). However, before we turn to an investigation of the links between narrative and death in this Man of Law's recounting, we need to consider how Mary's story came to be one increasingly concerned with law, human and divine. In the crossings, reinscriptions, fulfillments, and substitutions that produce and enact Marian devotion, we can begin to see the divisiveness of figuration that must confound narrative closure.

The Middle Ages produced Mary's body in specifically legal, narrative ways. Her corporeal relation to law was one of prophecy and its fulfillment. By the thirteenth century it was common to see representations of her reading Isaiah 7:14, the prophecy of her own life: "Behold a young woman shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Growing from Apocryphal stories of her childhood (Protevangelium 8:1),¹⁰ beliefs arose which held her to have

¹⁰This and all further references to canonical books of the Bible are from the Oxford edition.

¹¹This and all subsequent references to New Testament apocrypha are from this edition.

been learned in Jewish law and the seven liberal arts. Representations of her education, in turn, fed the tenet that only as a woman aware of the (pre)text of her own life and responsibilities in salvational law is she qualified to conceive (of) Christ (Schiller 1:42).

Mary's conception is similarly constrained by prophecy, by the double-natured position that the human *specula sine macula*¹¹ must hold if the salvational process is to be effective. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, made official dogma only in 1854 (Warner 236), began with the Protevangelium's description of Anna and Joachim's miraculous procreativity. The book begins by relating the story of how the couple is kept from participating in religious rites due to their barrenness. In grief, Joachim exiles himself to the mountains, and Anna begins to pray while walking in her garden. An angel appears to her saying "the Lord hath hearkened unto thy prayer, and thou shalt conceive and bear, and thy seed shall be spoken of in the whole world" (4:1). At the same time, an angel visits Joachim and tells him to come home because his wife will

¹¹This appellation for the Virgin originates in the Old Testament apocryphal work, Wisdom of Solomon, chapter 7, verse 26: "For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness." This was a common trope during the middle ages, connecting Mary also to God's wisdom.

conceive. The two meet and chastely embrace at the gate of Jerusalem. This moment was widely recreated in pictorial images in churches and books and was one that becomes the representation of Mary's conception (Grabar 129-31). The eastern church celebrated this day with a feast as early as the tenth century, while such a celebration was first known in England just before the Norman conquest (Attwater 122), held at two important churches, Canterbury and Winchester (Hirn 221). In the twelfth century, however, Bernard of Clairvaux brought up the main objection to celebrating a human's conception: doing so goes directly against dogma in that it has the potential to be a celebration of concupiscence. Already Bernard had tackled a similar issue in dealing with the feast celebrating the Virgin's birth. Only one other saint, John the Baptist, received such an honor. According to passages in Luke, his intra-uterine sanctification marked him as specially blessed and "filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (1:15). Bernard assumed--logically as a good Neoplatonist would--that God would give to his own mother the same blessing (Hirn 218).

The history of disputation over these topics pointedly evidences the process by which the period manufactured the Holy Virgin Mary. That the question of the holiness of her birth was decided before that concerning her conception

indicates a recursive process that attempts to write history to match popular and theological standards. However, Bernard remained firm in his belief that Mary was released from original sin only when God became incarnate within her, not at her own conception. In fact, throughout the period many scholastics and theologians were of the same opinion as the master of Clairvaux, but the feast was so popular that eventually doctrine caught up with practice.

The resulting doctrinal explanation is a mixture of scholasticism and mysticism. The scholastic part describes a notion of two conceptions, the natural and the spiritual. The first is the process by which the organism is materially put together. The second, called the "animation," occurs when the soul unites itself to the flesh of the embryo and is the ultimate goal of conception. Since the notion of a soul pure from birth would not challenge the church's doctrine of original sin, this scientific view allowed Mary to be born pure in body and soul, the former having been purified by the latter at the moment of animation (Hirn 224-25). This scientific, scholastic view dovetailed with the already popular festival of the Immaculate Conception, which itself was based upon and further fostered the idea that Mary had been conceived during Anna and Joachim's chaste embrace at the gate. In the thirteenth century these correspondences were harmonized by Duns Scotus. Scotus

suggested the idea of the *Præredemptio*, or the "Preredemption." Building on the idea of the two conceptions, he suggested that original sin was something inherent in the soul and not necessarily the body and, thus, God must have made an exception when providing his mother with a soul: "As the perfect intercessor, and the perfect filial son, Jesus could hardly have failed to obtain moral purity for his Mother" (Warner 242). Indeed, this notion of prevention of sin in Mary, says Scotus, enhanced the mediation and sacrifice of Christ since preventing illness is better than having to cure it once it has occurred.

Popular literature and its accompanying images reinforce the notion of a sinless Mary and take it one step further to remove concupiscence from her conception. Joachim and Anna's meeting at the gate becomes a very popular image in the period because it was believed to be the moment of Mary's conception. The image is often paired with images of the Annunciation of Gabriel to Mary, marking the understanding of this as a moment of conception as well as greeting. A common iconographical representation of the Annunciation contained the Christ child in body or soul, often already within the Virgin's body (Grabar 128-29). A similar picture of Anna and Joachim at the gate exists in the University galleries at Oxford. In the picture the

couple embraces as a small female figure clad in white, Mary, approaches them.¹³ Such an illustration suggests the common belief that Mary was conceived with a loving and blessed hug.

The logic of such arguments indicates the way in which the body of Mary was a vehicle for salvational law, which it simultaneously represented and legitimized for the purpose of Christian narrative. Her body as representative of the fallen human condition reveals the purpose of salvational law, while her exceptional circumstances underscore the promise of the law's fulfillment in the Incarnation of Christ. Similarly in Mary's role as the fleshly portion of the Incarnation, contradiction is written over so that law may be fulfilled. However, as is evident in texts as various as apocryphal works, theological writings, and cycle dramas, at the same time that contradictions are elided, anxieties remain, revealed in the very law meant to transcend them. Thus, the evident anxiety over Mary's conception finds a parallel in the threat that the Incarnation poses to the discursively established boundaries of the human body.

Mary's place in human law that protects such boundaries was questioned as early as the apocryphal works that describe her life prior to marrying Joseph. The Gospel of

See Hirn (238) for a fuller description and other examples of images of the embrace at the gate.

Pseudo-Matthew says that "Mary had vowed virginity" (chapter 8) whereas the other virgins of the temple were to be married when they came to be of age. But because of Levitical law, Mary also has to leave the temple and be married so that her menstruous body cannot "pollute the sanctuary of the Lord" (Protevangelium, 8:2). Despite her vow of virginity, she must live under Levitical laws because her body is exemplary, a typical female's.¹¹ In the Middle Ages, when these Judaic proscriptions moved from the realm of law into the realms of philosophy, theology, and science, the menses were understood as the formless matter of the world, waiting to be shaped by the semen, the pure male form, containing the image of God. Menstruation becomes, then, the sign of excess, matter not given form. Such a shaping gave the menses meaning in this Aristotelian, theological system. As such a woman's "spot" is a mark of Eve's original sin, a bodily defect all women inherit--one that produces their typical inferior status. All this, in turn, was supported and made material by empirical data and medical advice. For instance, couples who wished to have children were advised to have intercourse during the week after the woman's period when the menses would be as fresh as possible and more likely to take the form that the semen

¹¹See for example, Isaiah 30:22, Lamentations 1:17, and Ezekiel 18:6.

carried (Wood 710-27). As this logical progression makes apparent, the Levitical prohibitions had wide-ranging effects. The law of Leviticus becomes philosophy, science, and theology. A powerful set of discourses is brought into effect, each reifying the others so that even the status of empirical evidence is defined with Leviticus in the background.

So like the other virgins in the temple, Mary had to leave when she began menstruating. According to the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, Joseph was not even meant to be Mary's husband, but only a protector for her (chapter 8). The Protevangelium is not so clear on what role Joseph was chosen to play in Mary's life. However, the text's repeated description of her as one of the "pure virgins of the tribe of David" (10:1) and Joseph's own confusion over how to record Mary under Augustus's decree--as wife or daughter (17:1)--suggest that Mary did not leave the temple to become Joseph's wife. Again, these contentions indicate Mary's unique relation to the law as it developed through the period. She is the exemplary outcome of prophecy and the instigation of yet further prophecy, but she also creates confusion in the worldly functioning of the very laws that she is meant to exemplify.

In the N-town drama cycle, this confusion is evident when Mary finds herself in between church law and a vow to God:

A3ens þe lawe wyl I nevyr be
 But mannys felachep xal nevyr folwe me
 I wyl levyn evyr in chastyté
 Be þe grace of Goddys wylle. ("The Marriage of Mary and Joseph," lines 36-39)

Anna and Joachim promised her to the service of the temple in their petition to the Lord for a child. This passage intimates her prior knowledge of much of her life story: the story of her parents' barrenness, their petition to the Lord, her miraculous conception, her birth, and the fulfillment of the vows accompanying her parents' petition when she was brought to the temple to become the model of "Clennesse and chastyté" (line 70). I quote the Bishop's response to Mary's words at length because it represents so fully the troubling confusion over how to make sense of the extraordinary set of circumstance related to this young woman:

A mercy God pese wordys wyse
 Of þis fayr mayde clene,
 Thei trobyl myn hert in many wyse--
 Her wytt is grett, and þat is sene!
 In clenness to levyn in Godys servise
 No man here blame, non here tene [troubles].
 And 3it in lawe þus it lyce [goes],
 Þat such weddyd xulde bene.
 Who xal expownd þis oute?
 Þe lawe doth after lyff of clenness;
 Þe lawe doth bydde such mayndenes expres
 Þat to spowsyng they xulde hem dres.

God help us in þis dowhte. (79-91)

Mary's very existence brings doubt into a system of law, a system in which she is remarkably a key term both as a human and as the mother of God. The passage suggests the common medieval belief that Mary was aware of her place in salvational history, of "the mysteries and prophesies that were to receive their explanation and fulfillment in her person" (Hirn 267). Twice the bishop remarks upon the young woman's intelligence (lines 79 & 82) and on the aptness of her words in that no man can blame someone for wanting to live a holy life (line 84). Yet the law says maidens must marry "after lyff of clennes" (a statement that will affect Constance in some very revealing ways also). The "trobyl" arises in the question of which law to follow, for the passage points out anagogical incompatibility between two ways of making meaning. The bishop simply does not know how to deal with a wise, clean woman who wishes to live a holy life. Neither empirical experience nor law provides him with a context for making sense of this situation. Ultimately, the bishop must call for divine intervention to solve the interpretive dilemma that he faces in the example of Mary. An angel appears, and in the following scenes, the elderly Joseph is chosen as Mary's husband when his wooden staff begins to bloom.

Mary, however, is conspicuously absent for the next two hundred lines. Sense is made of her and for her through articulation of various discourses--from the announcement of the messenger to all people about what is to be done, to Joseph's embarrassment over the social impropriety of taking a young wife; from the characters "*generacionis David*" that remind Joseph of his proper place and responsibilities in patrilineal descent to the mysticism of the moment when the dead wood begins to bloom. She and her "wordys wyse" and great "wytt" disappear and are replaced by the production of faith of which she is the prime marker. This production is characterized by a specific gendered and generational emphasis, which is both laid at the feet of Mary and is taken out of her hands. Narratological production under the guise of divine grace replaces and then recreates who Mary is and what she signifies.

As the bishop finds, the medieval concept of Mary proves troubling in part because Mary was closely associated with texts that were held to presage her life. Even before the bishop begins to deal with her, her life story consists of traces of law, prophecy, texts, and writings. Compare this situation to a very revealing passage from Alan of Lille's Plaint of Nature (written some time between 1160 and

1172) which describes the ideal (Neo)Platonic version of how the goddess Nature creates human beings:

With the aid of a reed-pen, the maiden [Nature] called up various images by drawing on slate tablets. The picture, however, did not cling closely to the underlying material but, quickly fading and disappearing, left no trace of the impression behind. (Prose 2)

Notice how the ideas expressed in the above quotation protect the notions of absolute presence and self-identity both of created and of creator, whereas Mary's life story is beginning to suggest that such unity is only apparent. So the N-Town bishop is bound to find that underlying the apparent unity of medieval Christianity is an untraceable web of often contradictory intentions, readings, and contexts. The troubling consequences of this situation, which are evident in medieval attempts to eliminate confusion from the narratives of the Immaculate Conception and the Incarnation, show up as well in medieval representations of the relation between Mary and Eve.

Mary shares a unique relationship with Eve. That Mary righted humanity and femininity with her actions was a popular trope in the Middle Ages, present in learned writings and popular literature. Mary changed "Eva"--the first defect of the flesh--to the "Ave"¹⁴ of blessing and

¹⁴A typical example of this usage occurs on page 44 of the Malleus Maleficarum, another in the N-Town "The Parliament of Heaven," line 219.

faith. By thus "turnand þe name of eve again"--"Turning the name of Eve again," (Brown, Fourteenth 45:8)¹⁵--Mary represents the original and continuing need for salvation as well as the promise and fulfillment of salvational law. The unity broken by one woman is recreated through another.

The prevalent reading of Eve's sin and her very coming into being connect her with a loss of the literal, with the process of nominalization which is a turning away from things. Prior to her meeting with the serpent, Eve's entrance into the world marks a conjunction between language and sexuality, or sexual difference, since both are called into being simultaneously and causally.¹⁶ As Carolyn Dinshaw proposes, speaking of Chaucer's warning to his scribe:

. . . if Adam is the first namer, associated with a language that is unified, perfectly expressive of intent or spirit, Eve is associated with fallen language . . . , with division, difference, fragmentation, and dispersal that characterize the condition of historical language. (6)

In "Sexuality, Sin, and Sorrow" Mieke Bal presents the typical church reading of Adam in which as the first human, Adam is a species, not an individual; the first human is

¹⁵Unless otherwise noted, all lyric citations are from Brown's editions. The following practice is used in reference to lyrics: the number of the lyric in Brown is followed by a colon and the line number(s). Where necessary I also distinguish between Brown's collections of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century lyrics.

¹⁶Reference Genesis 2:18-23.

simultaneously genre and the only example of that genre. This sexless creature has been differentiated only from its surroundings, clay pulled from the earth by Jahweh and enlivened by Jahweh's divine breath. Made in the image of God to mirror his reason and love,¹⁷ the first human's relationship with God and the book of creation is one of unity, exact expression, and replication. In direct line from its creator, it possesses form, Idea, substance, Being, singularity, "oneness." However, the second human's relationship to its god is one of contingency, derivation, accident, supplement, helper. The second human is the inexactitude of duplication. Philo Judaeus (c. 30 B.C. - A.D. 45) is an early example in what was to become a widespread and virtually transparent mode of describing the relationship between the genders:

To begin with, the helper is a created one, for it says "Let us make a helper for him"; and in the next place, is subsequent to him who is to be helped, for He had formed the mind before and is about to form its helper. (qtd. in Bloch page 10)

The writers of the fifteenth-century treatise on witchcraft, the Malleus Maleficarum, describe woman's formation as follows:

And it should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from

¹⁷See Genesis 1:26 and "God Creates Adam and Eve" in the York Plays.

a bent rib . . . bent as it were in a contrary direction to man. (44)

This passage presents a typical Christian outgrowth of hierarchical Platonic duality fostered in the early church. Earlier, Paul had set the stage for such readings, echoing the Genesis creation myth and collocating language, bodily activity and contingency with Eve's secondary status and primary sin:

. . . women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion. Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children . . . (1 Timothy 2:9-15)

In other words, Eve's sin has to do with her apparent inability to comprehend words but her facility in using them on another. And it is this use that culminates in sexual and nominal differentiation in the world, for when the first humans eat some fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil "the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked" (Genesis 3:7). The superfluity--which is the danger--of Eve's words to Adam culminates in the awareness of sexual difference and the no-longer-superfluous addition of clothing. Philo distinguishes between the Adam of the first chapter of Genesis and the Adam of the second chapter who has fallen "from innocence and simplicity of character

to all kinds of wickedness" (22). Again, Eve is responsible for man's movement--in language and clothing--further from unity with the book of creation.

Thus in medieval theology, philosophy, and science, is woman associated with all that is inessential, nonliteral, multiple. Like clothing, she has the potential to be a helpmeet or a dangerous supplemental guise. As R. Howard Bloch asserts: "her coming into being is synonymous . . . with a loss--within language--of the literal . . . [T]he creation of woman is synonymous with the creation of metaphor" (11). She is the corporeal copy of the incorporeality of truth, much as language copies ideas.¹⁸ She is the trope, the turning, that Mary must re-turn through spotless reflection of the divine.

The collocations, in other words, between woman's original nature and the nature of her original sin are even more insidious. As a copy her language cannot contain the one-to-one correlations that the first human's had, and so her language marks the loss within that original language. Her sin with the serpent, then, becomes one of language, misinterpreted, missed, an attempt at communication from outside the unity that the garden is supposed to hold for Adam. And this sin becomes located in her body--eating of

¹⁸Cf. Augustine's Confessions, book 7, chapter 20.

the tree of knowledge leads to knowledge of sexual differentiation. Adam's paradisiacal unity is split by the defective, deficient copy of his body, of his intellect, of his soul, and he enters the world of toil and constant (Neoplatonic) struggle to regain what he once had (Bal 29) through activities at least one step removed from those he had enjoyed in the garden: he now must toil to make the soil produce his existence, instead of merely tending the garden and receiving the direct blessings given him by God. Only Adam will remember this prior unity and suffer the full consequences of its loss, of course, because Eve never enjoyed anything but a mediated relationship to her creator.

Therefore, according to the typical medieval reading, as such an imperfect extrapolation from the first human, woman seems fated from inception to be a threat to paradisiacal unity. Yet the desire present in the Garden of Eden even before the second human's wish to eat of the fruit of knowledge indicates that the narrativized unity of the garden is not the transcendent, natural creation that materializes in the corpus of Christian history. Instead, a series of substitutions becomes apparent. "'It is not good that the man should be alone'" declares God and begins to make the animals. "The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him"

(Genesis 2:18 & 20). This story posits a God whose world is not complete--so he makes the earth--but the story immediately writes over this incompleteness by displacing it onto the human. The perfection of the unfallen garden is shown to be a myth by Adam's desire, which is an indication of lack. This incompleteness is then displaced onto and creates the inferiority of Eve. So even in this supposedly unsullied original--Adam--lies the potential to produce the inexact copy second human. Eve and her tempter are blamed for what is revealed in this reading to be a pre-existing narratological condition. The serpent marks a mimetic break in the creation myth similar to Eve's. The first human is given dominion over all creatures on earth (Genesis 1:28 & 2:20), yet the serpent still represents a threat. Described as "more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made" (Genesis 3:1), the serpent represents the seductive power of nature, the plurality of context. Again, the threat here lies in language: Eve claims that the serpent "beguiled" her causing her to eat the fruit (3:13).¹⁰ Even in paradise the traces of language are uncontrollable.

¹⁰Philo understands the serpent, which he reads as a fallen representation of all bodily pleasures tied to mental capacity, to be the first troper of language (e.g. 45-49).

Indeed, here we see the connection between law and accident, for the misrepresentations that produce the fall become the very structure upon which the whole of salvational law is founded. Mary as the turning of Eve and product of the law is the result of this accident. The Holy Virgin comes to represent lack, desire, and the basis of uncontrollableness out of which ostensibly positive concepts, like God's grace, power, and love for humanity, grew. We begin to see that the opposition between Mary and Eve, good and evil, text and body, is more appositional and interdependent than the Christian ethic of transcendence suggests.

The conjunction of the Annunciation and the Incarnation is one place where the confusion that still persists in Mary's restoration of Eve becomes apparent. The Incarnation challenges the notion of the discrete boundaries of the human body, since the boundaries of Mary's body were made moot in the process, as were all the laws and social mores meant to keep those boundaries intact or permeable only under certain conditions. The Word enters the flesh immediately as the angel Gabriel announces the good news to Mary and Mary replies with "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). This moment of Annunciation is commonly considered to be the moment in which the Incarnation takes place. Countless

images in the early church reflect this belief¹⁰ and by the time of Chaucer's early translation of Guillaume de Deguilleville's "La Priere de Nostre Dame," the idea that the Annunciation and the Incarnation were simultaneous had found its way into popular literature. Chaucer writes in praise of the Virgin in this abecedarius that "the Holi Gost thee soughte / Whan Gabrielles vois cam to thin ere" (lines 114-15). Additionally, Hirn cites several poems that refer to Gabriel as "*seminiverbius*." Hirn also quotes St.

Bernard's (1090 - 1153) *Sermo II in festo Pentecostes*:

missus est interim Gabriel angelus a Deo, ut verbum patris per aurem virginis in ventrem et mentem ipsius eructaret, ut eadem via intraret antidotum, qua venenum intraverat. (qtd. on page 298)

[In the meantime, the angel Gabriel was sent by God that he, himself, might emit¹¹ the word of the father through the virgin's ear into her womb and mind, so that by that way by which the poison had entered, the antidote might enter.]

This passage uses the typological connection between Eve and Mary in order to reinstitute the divine symmetry of Mary's

¹⁰ For a sampling see Grabar, 128-29. Additionally, many of the religious lyrics of the fourteenth century reflect a similar idea. See Brown, lyrics 26, 41, and 45.

¹¹ Other meanings of this word--including "belch forth," "vomit," "cast out," and "eject"--indicate the potential effects of context. All these translations, including "emit," suggest notions of boundaries, the word traveling from location to location, yet the pleasant, proprietary meanings are contained in the same word as the meanings suggesting exclusivity and illness.

turning the name of Eve. But as Genesis suggests its own narratological status, the passage indicates that it is the word itself that is dangerous, that has in it the power to kill and heal. The danger of the word is simultaneously its potential, as "*venenum*" and "*antidotum*" enter in the same way;-- and this figuring of language is at once supplemented and supplanted by the female figures in the narrative. Eve is written as body in the creation myth and this begins the narrative of salvational law; Mary's body is written as prophecy, stemming from Eve's sin, and is the outcome and fulfillment of law; and so in the narrative design that conjoins these figures, the body of each figure must be divided by the other and made subject to linguistic and exemplary confusion. Assigned the place of accident, mistake, defect, Eve is the predication of law, while Mary is the figure whom divine law has created but human law as iteration of divine cannot control. The inverted double of Eve's, Mary's body is figuratively the result of accident, of the misinterpretation of words, even as its unique status is paradoxically created by standard repetitions of words. The Annunciation repeats the beguiling of Eve in Eden and the word changes from evil to divine, and yet in this very

--One might add "*pharmakon*" to this list. See Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy" on the status of such permeable signifiers.

repetition, we can begin to see a divisiveness in words, texts, bodies, and cultural histories that must vex all tellings of this narrative.

These confounding narrative complexities, which point to the limits of any narrative construction of character, can be understood still more fully by turning to the example of Chaucer's Constance, who is so crucially concerned with the question of law. Explicitly and implicitly, Constance shares with her mothers-in-law, the Sultanness and Donegild, a relationship similar to that which Mary shares with Eve, that of the inverted double. She prays to Mary (2.841-54) and to the cross (2.451-62), and the text also represents her with imagery familiar to Marian devotion. 'The Man of Law's tale also invokes other similarities: he narrates Constance's death over and over as he attempts to substantiate the virtues he holds dear. Constructed via discourse very much as Mary had been, Constance is first introduced into the tale as narrative, as Carolyn Dinshaw aptly points out: "She exists as a tale of a virgin" (95) circulated by the "commune voys" (2.155).³ As with the

³See particularly lines 2.162-68 which invoke many of the tropes often used to describe Mary. Hirn collects many of these descriptions and more when he writes of "The Childhood of Mary" as does Attwater. For a collection of specific likenesses, see Dor (133-34).

⁴My reading builds on Dinshaw's structuralist perspective, based on Levi-Strauss, in an attempt to analyze some of the

story of Mary, this drama's main character is made what she needs to be:

In hire is heigh beautee, withoute pride,
Yowthe, withoute grenehede [immaturity] or folye;
To alle hire werkes vertu is hir gyde;
Humblesse hath slayn in hire al tirannye.
She is mirour of alle curteisye;
Hir herte is verray chambre of hoolynesse,
Hir hand, ministre of fredam for almesse [generosity in giving]. (2.162-68)

These lines could easily be about the Holy Virgin, who is variously described as the most spacious chamber that could hold the unholdable God, as a mirror of virtue (by Ambrosius), and as the prettiest but most humble maiden in any context.⁵ Such orthodoxy has led many scholars to assume her passivity. Carolyn Dinshaw calls her, via Levi-Strauss, a commodity passed around among men, a blank page waiting for signification (88-112). In a Bakhtinian reading, Juliette Dor describes Constance as "single-voiced," repeating "monological discourses without ever expecting a reply" and as obedient to the omniscient voice of God, represented on earth by her father and others who control her life (131 & 138). Dor compares Constance to the Holy Virgin to illustrate just how traditional and passive Constance is. By recalling these likenesses, the Man of Law

articulations her reading takes for granted.

Hirn collects all these descriptions and more when he writes of "The Childhood of Mary." Attwater also collects similar depictions.

invokes the propriety of the law in its relation to story-telling in an attempt to establish firm categories of good and evil, categories that cannot be "pynche[d]" (1.326).

On the evil side, the Man of Law indicts the Sultanness and Donegild with typically misogynistic terms, connecting them with their originally sinful ancestor. The Sultanness has her own son and everyone in his wedding party, except Constance, killed on the wedding night. For this crime, the Man of Law disparages the Sultanness in two ways: by saying she is a "feyned womman" (2.362) and by saying she is just like a woman. He calls her a "serpent under femynynytee" (2.360) or a snake in women's clothes and "Eva" the "instrument" of "Sathan" (2.368 & 370 & 365). These metaphors recall the orthodox medieval misogynistic reading of the fall. The woman is collateral, associated with the costume and the tool of evil. She is associated with secondary nature; here she is even secondary to evil. In effect, she is metaphor itself and as such she recalls the fallibility of the human flesh, that "tissue of . . . flesh" (Augustine, 13.15), the "robe" and "wede" (Fourteenth 16:19 & 31) that Mary gave to Jesus in order to make manifest the trinity. Even Mary's long-lasting procreative effects are mirrored in this curse's "al that may confounde / Vertue and innocence . . . / Is bred in thee" (2.362-64). And this

breeding is why humanity has been "chaced from [its] heritage" (2.366).

The use of "confounde" is pointed here: meaning to mix or pour together, it describes a process in which discrete elements are combined to become something different. And what is confounding in the sense of "confused" or "confusing" is that the passage reminds us of its own metaphoricity even as it demonizes figuration. Thus, the contradiction of the Sultanness being both a feigned woman and a woman just like Eve evidences the structure and the structural limits of this system of making meaning; the curse brings into relief the confounding limits of narrative construction that were made evident in arguments over Mary's conception and the Incarnation. The emphasis on procreation, heritage, and marriage (2.369)--in Chaucer's understanding of their use and misuse--underscores the many overdetermined elements of cultural heritage caught up in this narrative and the tenuous nature of the exemplary outcome that Constance represents. The foregoing passage attempts to assert logical control over its figurative terms in order to apply them to its purpose--the curse of the Sultanness. Yet it points to its own failure by calling up the name of Eve and her connection to metaphor.

Similarly, the Man of Law curses Donegild. Donegild's jealousy over her son's marriage to Constance leads the older woman to counterfeit letters about the birth of the couple's child. Upon receiving these letters saying that his wife--described as "an elf"--has given birth to "a feendly creature" (2.754 & 751), Alla writes Constance back saying that he loves her and the child and that he will "Welcome the sonde [dispensation] of Crist for everemoore" since he is "now lerned in [Christ's] loore" (2.760 & 761). But Donegild intercepts this letter as well and counterfeits another one in Alla's name, indicating that Constance and her son should be exiled on the same ship in which she arrived. In his curse of this woman, the Man of Law claims to have no "Englissh digne," or "English appropriate" (2.778), to speak of her sin; only the "feend" can "enditen" her (2.780 & 781). The verb "endite" here has specific legal connotations but also suggests the process of storytelling.²⁶ In the Monk's Tale (line 3858, group B numbering) it carries the weight of "accuse," as it does here; but in other usages in Chaucer, "to endite" is to compose, transitively or intransitively. It is a verb that suggests writing, describing, relating, drafting, telling. Indeed, an "inditing" is a composition or the style of a

²⁶ On this word, see Shoaf (289), and A Chaucer Glossary.

composition.²⁷ Given this, the use of "enditen" here illustrates a particular crossing of the boundary lines between law and literature, a legal "caas" and a poem. The Man of Law, however, seems unaware of such similarities since he claims he has no tell to tell as if every case he knows since the time of William the Conqueror (1.323-24) is not also a story. As the verb "endite" suggests here, exemplarity is a strategy law shares with poetry. The Man of Law's own preambulatory remarks are evidence of this connection as he serves as Chaucer's own copyright representative, listing works of the poet and providing synopses of some.²⁸ His tale itself is a repetition of one he heard from others (2.132), and yet with the context of the word that can be both poison and remedy--which is the Eve/Mary binary--brought to bear upon this story and its telling, even the most standard repetition of law and the notion of transcendence upon which it operates cannot remain untouched.

²⁷ The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology suggests that the Middle English usage was a mixture of the Latin verb *indicere* meaning "to proclaim, appoint, impose" and the Old French verb *enditier* meaning "to declare, dictate, compose."

²⁸ Dinshaw, 91, also suggests that the words "endite" and "thyng" from the portrait of the Man of Law in the General Prologue connect literary output with law since these words are commonly used in Chaucer to refer to literary creations.

The Man of Law's curse of Donegild also suggests something more, something revealing about the function of law as the teller of this tale understands it. The narrator claims to have no language to match the crime he sees before him. Because Donegild's sin mirrors Eve's in many ways, he does not want to own her as a character in his tale; his language cannot even speak of her. Only the devil seems to have the words and the laws to fit the crime. Yet, as ruler of what is evil, the fiend was understood in the period to be ruler of nothing, a negative, non-productive deficiency.²⁹ Yet he still has the potential to make law; indeed, Satan has the power to indict Donegild, to make her into a criminal; that is, to write her character as a traitor (2.781). In the figurations of his curse, the Man of Law gives over the power of creation to that which he would damn. Donegild's sin is that her hand wrote the letter that caused her daughter-in-law and grandchild to be exiled. Thus, she disseminated "al the venym of this cursed dede" (2.890 & 891), recalling the association of this imagery

²⁹See Confessions book 2, chapter 8, 7.3 & 4. Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy, based on a Platonic notion of always striving for the true good in the world, operates on the idea of "good as cause and sum" of all worldly striving (Prose 10); anything moving away from the good is evil. See Prose 12 for an explicit definition. And, of course, the whole of Dante's Inferno creates images of evil as deficiency, images which culminate in a vision of Satan frozen in the ice of Cocytus creating the very ice which imprisons him in silence.

with Eve's sin. Furthermore, the insinuation of a character from outside the narrator's frame of reference and escaping his ability to recount reminds us of the confounding unreliability of that frame. But the Man of Law makes her fit into his story; that is, he finds English to talk about her, and his sentence for her is death. But in sentencing her he cannot help but show the disturbing traces of other stories, their threat and potential.

In such resolutions we witness the normalizing and naturalizing functions of narrative. The Man of Law uses Constance's reactions to these various situations to reinstitute Christian laws and mores and to provide the "mirour" (2.166) of Christianity to extra-narrative threats. For instance, early in the story the Sultanness defends her own religion, saying,

But oon avow to grete God I heete,
The lyf shal rather out of my body sterte
Or Makometes [Mohammed's] lawe out of myn herte!

What sholde us tyden of this newe lawe
But thraldom to oure bodies and penance,
And afterward in helle to be drawe,
For we reneyed Mahoun [Mohammed] oure creance? (2.334-40)

With its emphasis on religion as law, this passage echoes an earlier one in which the Sultan discusses with his lords how best to obtain Constance as his bride. The Muslim fellowship recognizes the "diversitee / Bitwene [the] lawes" (2.220-21) of their faith and the Christian one. But by the time that

the Sultanness has been cursed and Constance begins to pray⁴³ to the cross, the narrative claims that there is "No wight but God" and "No wight but Crist, sanz faille" (2.476 & 501) who can know the secrets of the universe. The Moslem laws and believers become the vehicle of legitimization for the Christian ethic. The lines that present the story of Constance's time among the Moslems (2.211-504) recreate the misogyny and the racial, or "heritage-centered," anti-sociality of the creation myth. In this way, these lines pose a threat to the narratively established boundaries of Christianity, even as the narrative and heroine remain examples of the Man of Law's faith.

Similarly, as the tale describes Constance's dealings with Donegild, the Man of Law's narrative concerns make apparent the self-contradictory construction of the exemplary Christian figure of Constance. On her way to Alla's kingdom, Constance launches into a prayer to the Holy Virgin as her rudderless ship is launched to sea:

"Mooder," quod she, "and mayde bright, Marie,
Sooth is that thugh wommanes eggement [instigation]
Mankynde was lorn, and damned ay to dye,
For which thy child was on a croys yrent." (2.841-44)

Like many commonplace prayers to the Virgin, this one calls on the paradox of Mary's being both "mooder" and "mayde."

⁴³Constance's prayer reflects portions of the Good Friday mass as well as the votive Mass that invokes the help of the cross for travelers.

With her repetition of this prayer, Constance is once again allied with Mary and seemingly set apart from Eve, the woman through whom "Mankynde was lorn." Yet the Man of Law's concern over how "ful hooly" wives (2.709) are required to lay a little of "hir hoolynesse aside" (2.713) in the marriage bed recalls and rewrites Donegild's earlier concern over her son taking "So strange a creature" as his mate (2.700). The full passage reads as follows:

They goon to bedde, as it was skile and right;
For thogh that wyves be ful hooly thynges,
They moste take in pacience at nyght
Swiche manere necessities as been plesynges
To folk that han ywedded hem with rynges,
And leye a lite hir hoolynesse aside,
As for the tyme--it may no bet bitide. (2.708-14)

The passage intimates a network of different and contradictory discourses which the Man of Law tries to normalize. The contention behind this desire for normalization is matched by that over the marriage of Joseph and Mary: as the mother of God Mary was thought to be a perpetual virgin yet as a human she was also called upon to live up to legalities which defined intercourse as a necessary part of marriage.⁴¹

As with the Man of Law's attempt to harmonize sexuality and spirituality, many medieval definitions of marriage attempted to develop definitions of marriage that would

⁴¹Dinshaw, Dor, and Furrow discuss the contention over Constance's sexuality.

allow for valorization of both human sexuality and spiritual union. Penny S. Gold collects and explores several of the most influential arguments concerning Mary and Joseph's marriage which, despite their many differences, illustrate the normalizing influence of Christian rhetoric, which uses as its supports legal, philosophical, and scientific discourses. The information that Gold collects illustrates the difficulties in and various results of trying to find a definition of marriage for the holy couple. Gratian, in his Concordia discordantium canonum (c. 1140), and Hugh of St. Victor (1097-1141) attempt reconciliations of these apparent contradictions. Gratian develops a system of the three goods of marriage--fidelity, offspring, and the sacrament--of which Mary and Joseph had all three, but only in name. Thus, Gratian adds that a marriage in name is different from but just as valid as one that also has the substance (*res*) or effect (*effectus*) of physical union. Hugh lays out a two-fold plan of marriage in which there is the marriage, which is consent, and the office of marriage, which is copulation, each of which is a sacrament. Thus, for Hugh there can be true marriage before sex, and marriage can be holy without sex because without sex the union is a spiritual one like that between God and the human soul. Even so Hugh also

valorizes the union of the flesh in marriage. As Gold characterizes Hugh's position:

the intercourse of the flesh (the office of marriage) typifies that union made between Christ and the church through Christ's assumption of the flesh; thus there could be no sacrament of Christ and the church where there was no carnal mixing. (108)

The confounding problem here is that this process of harmonization paradoxically serves to reinscribe the terms of the binary opposition that it is meant to overcome. As they codify marriage law, Gratian and Hugh, as well as later writers like Peter Lombard (writing fifteen to twenty years after Gratian and Hugh) and Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth century), only reinstate the dichotomous categories of the Neoplatonic system they inherit and inhabit. Indeed, the period's fascination with the paradoxes that Mary represents grows out of this valorization of duality. Mary is the spiritual body from whom "he tok fleysh & blod, / ihesus, heuene kynge" (Fourteenth 11:11-12). Chaucer, repeating church liturgy and imagery, has the Prioress call to the Holy Virgin, "O mooder Mayde, O mayde Mooder free! / O bussh unbrent, brennyng in Moyses sighte" (7.467-68).³² An "Orison to the Blessed Virgin" dating from 1333 foregrounds

³²Hirn collects countless examples of paradoxical nominalizations of the Virgin. See his chapter "Symbols of the Virgin."

the familial and social ideologies that bound and (re)create this symbolic system:

Pou wommon . . .
 Pyn oun eader [father] bere.
 Bat on wommon was moder
 To uader and hyre broper--
 So neuer oper nas.
 Pou my suster and moder
 And py sone my broper--
 Who shoulde peonne drede?
 Who-so hauet pe kyng to broder
 And ek pe quene to moder
 Wel auhte uor to spede. (16:1-12)

Within such a pervasive system of imagery, Mary becomes exemplary for behavior in Christian marriage³³ even as the resulting system of rhetoric, in which soul and body are categorically opposed, produces the ideological context in which the Man of Law must seemingly compromise Christian precepts in bringing Constance to bed on her wedding night. It also allows him an apparent ease with which to moralize on the institution of marriage: "Housbondes been alle goode, and han ben yoore; / That knowen wyves; I dar sey yow na moore" (2.772-73).

Given these complexities in narrative strategy and their bedeviling consequences for the operation of exemplarity, we begin to see how and around what terms this teller, as well his cultural contexts, stop the slippages of the discrete elements of his systemic rhetoric. We see what

³³Hirn, 268-69, collects several extrapolations of this virtuous behavior.

he takes as and makes into foundational components. In the Man of Law's curse of the Sultanness, the Muslim law is a set of terms that supplement and mediate Christian laws. His opinion takes its shape from the very thing that it curses. As such a medium, these terms remind us of the intersections of substitutions and traces that produce the "law." These intersections are most apparent in the tale's anxiety over the "feyned womman," the Sultanness (2.362). Similarly, Donegild, neither true nor false, marks the status of the break that establishes the truth of the tale. These characters are explicitly both inside the tale and on its borders and as such make us rethink the status of other ostensibly more exemplary characters. These passages and the women they mimetically reproduce bring into relief the structuration of that mimetic desire. The tensions that surround these characters and the way that this tension bleeds onto Constance point to the pervasive desire to halt the dissolution of the a priori constituents of this system. These stoppages become the foundation for monuments to a certain type of logic. Here, they monumentalize Christianity, Constance, and the Man of Law himself. By invoking exemplarity as a mode of storytelling, the tale points to the specter that animates this monumental logic, a specter that "can no longer be distinguished, with the same assurance, from truth, reality, living flesh" (Derrida,

"Plato's Pharmacy" 104). Subsequently it is no wonder that Constance cannot assuredly be distinguished from her ghost, a characteristic she shares with the Sultanness and Donegild.³⁴

The first picture provided of Constance as a living ghost is on the day she is to be sent off to marry the Sultan, a day described as "fatal" (2.261). Lines 190 through 203 discuss the laws of fate, the "large book" that is in "hevene ywriten" (2.190 & 200), but Constance's death is not predicted in these lines; the Sultan's is. Yet, Constance is the ghost, who "with sorwe al overcome / Ful pale" goes to meet her fate (2.264-65), the possibility that she might "spille" or die ever present (2.285). As she floats on the sea after the Sultanness--that "wikked goost" (2.404)--has set her out in a rudderless ship, Constance waits "After hir deeth ful often" (2.467). When she finally lands, "In hir langage mercy she bisoghte, / The lyf out of hir body for to twynne, / Hire to delivere of wo that she was inne" (2.516-18). A young knight falls in love with Constance and loves her so much "That verrailly hym thoughte he sholde spille" unless he has his way with the foundling

³⁴Bronfen writes of the relation between death and aesthetics, while in "Living On" Derrida analyzes the way in which the belief in the fixity of the boundary between life and death founds the fixity of all borderlines. My reading here builds on the work of both theorists.

(2.587). When Constance refuses his advances, he kills her benefactress in retaliation, and she is blamed for the murder. As the narrator describes her at her trial: "For as the lomb toward his deeth is broght, / So stant this innocent bifore the kyng" (2.617-618). As she stands accused, the narrator again describes her with a pallor of death:

Have ye nat seyn somtyme a pale face,
 Among a prees, of hym that hath be lad
 Toward his deeth, where as hym gat no grace,
 And swich a colour in his face hath had
 Men myghte knowe his face that was bistad
 Amonges alle the faces in that route?
 So stant Custance, and looketh hire aboute. (2.645-51)

After having Alla's child and being sent away, she again appears as a shadow of the grave, "with a deedly pale face" (2. 822).

The story of Constance's (potential for) death is told again and again as the tale reinscribes its terms. In this way, Constance is like the Blessed Virgin whose death was also foretold and made an adumbration of Jesus's. Luke, chapter two, tells the story of the Purification. Mary and Joseph take the infant to the temple "according to the law" (verses 22 & 24) and present him to the priest, Simeon. Simeon's blessing includes a prophecy for mother and child:

Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed. (2: 34-35)

During the Middle Ages, this presentiment was paralleled to the lance which pierced Jesus's body on the cross, suggesting the *mater dolorosa* (Hirn 380-81). Again, damnation, salvation, and redemption are blended through the medium of the prophetic metaphor that is Mary. The prophecy of Mary's death allows her death to become exemplary of narrative design, an element in a plot moving towards a teleological, indeed eschatological, ending.³⁵ Like Constance's, Mary's own death story is one that grows with time. From the early centuries of Christianity through the middle ages, Mary's story grew from being merely a fact of history to a topic of disputation and literary investigation, and even though the stories about her may have been different, the eschatology remained essentially the same.³⁶ Ultimately, through many retellings of her death, Mary lives on through the stories of the Assumption of her body or her Dormition at the time of her leaving earth. Similarly, Constance's death is prophesied and even shown time after time. In an almost exact parallel to

³⁵My reading here builds on Marcuse's essay on the social uses of death.

³⁶See Hirn's chapter "Mary's Death and Assumption" and Warner's chapter "The Assumption." Both works read through various apocryphal books and theological works and in so doing betoken how her death story came to be told in such a way as to reflect and, in turn, produce its own teleology. Chapter Four will look more closely at this process.

Simeon's prophecy about Mary's death in the temple, the Man of Law creates the potential for Constance's death as an

So vertuous a lyvere [being] in my lyf
 Ne saugh I nevere as she, ne herde of mo,
 Of worldly wommen, mayde, ne of wyf.
 I dar wel seyn hir hadde levere a knyf
 Thurghout hir brest, than ben a womman wikke;
 There is no man koude brynge hire to that prikke.
 (2.1024-29)

The narrator tells the tale of Constance's death over and over again, yet the tale ends with Constance's living on in the present tense.

Again, however, the exemplarity here must prove confounding. Thus, the issue of death in the Man of Law's Tale initiates the question "Where is the law?" It seems to be written on the pale faces of the dead women who figure as examples in this tale,¹⁷ and therein lies the problem. Recalling the example of Mary, Constance's ghosts reflect the telos of the law and are its manifestations, and yet these very manifestations--repeated and varied endlessly¹⁸--also betoken the errancy of metaphor and the infinite

¹⁷Fradenburg argues that such is the case in Troilus and Criseyde and The Book of the Duchess. My reading here also builds on Bronfen's deconstruction of the relation between aesthetics and death.

¹⁸See the end of the tale, which in its "Joye after wo" and wish for grace for the pilgrims "that been in this place" (2.1161 & 1162, my emphasis) suggests the interdependent nature of its telling and signification.

possibility of iteration and of rhetorical and cultural contexts without absolute anchor.

This tension between the theology of the system and the mimetic status of the system becomes most apparent in the structure of exemplarity on which the tale and the narrator's profession, itself, operate. Mary and Constance are examples of a system that makes itself through its examples. Whether she is read as a model of being a true daughter, wife, mother, Christian, or saint, Constance's status as example marks both the iterability of exemplarity and the desire to stop it, to halt iteration by walling it up.⁴⁰ Two times in his tale, the Man of Law brings lists of examples to bear upon the life of Constance. In both of these instances--lines 470-504 and 932-945--the narrator uses examples from the Bible and apocryphal and hagiographical writings to explain why Constance was not killed by her adventures at sea. He alludes to the stories of Daniel in the lions' den, Jonah and the whale, the Hebrew people's escape from captivity, Saint Egyptian Mary's life in the wilderness, and the feeding of the five thousand with

³⁹In "Signature, Event, Context" Derrida writes of the dispersive effect of contextual errancy.

⁴⁰Again, Shoaf makes a similar point throughout his essay, using the vocabulary of circulation and corruption. My suggestion here is that this is a reading and writing practice used not only by the Man of Law uses but also used as a world-building strategy by many readers.

five loaves and two fishes in the first passage. The second passage calls up the examples of David and Goliath and Judith and Holofernes. Used to build a case, that is, to provide precedents for fictive events, as they are here, these examples suggest the potential to call up other contexts infinitely. The examples are about death and overcoming it,⁴¹ yet they indicate a complex relation to death when viewed as monuments created to wall in the traces of language. The Man of Law's intention in invoking these examples is to illustrate God's grace and transcendent presence. But unlike Alan of Lille's description of how Nature writes the world tracelessly according to God's ideas, the Man of Law's narration calls on its traces in its process of signification. In a tale that focuses so heavily on astrological fate⁴² and divine justice--or God's "sonde" (2.523, 760, 826 902)--the tale points to the angogical differences of perspective upon which it operates, as most hagiographies do.⁴³ Yet the tale's focus on how law is

⁴¹Farrell points out that the first group of examples were often used in the liturgy as part of the rites for those who were near death.

⁴²As evidence of this tendency, see lines 190-203 and 295-308 and the introduction of the tale itself, which is conglomeration of astrological, philosophical, scientific, and theological readings of the time of day.

⁴³See for instance the Second Nun's Tale of Saint Cecilia or the Prioress's Tale of the little clergeon.

constructed--which is *how it is put to use*--emphasizes the limits of law, narrative, and language. From the perspective we have been establishing here, we see that ghosts, umbras, and phantoms of other contexts are invoked in each exemplary repetition, even as examples do indeed reify concepts. Each example contains not only the use the Man of Law wishes it to hold and to which he tries to hold it, but also the potential for figurative errancy, contradiction, otherness, or "sin."

Exemplary of the Man of Law's system of values, Constance represents the narrator's idea of law and propriety, and yet this very act of representation divides his notion of transcendence. From this perspective, Constance can be understood to supplement and reanimate the Man of Law's books and also to expedite and inspire further writings,⁴⁴ which in turn will substitute for her. While supplementing previous texts--the "caas and doomes alle" (1.323) the Man has in his memory--Constance's story will also authenticate these same texts, because the legalistic mode of discourse, which we have seen maintaining and being maintained by theology and philosophy, uses and recreates the opposition between text and body to ascribe and maintain authority. Constance becomes a shadowy point of mediation

⁴⁴The Man of Law ends his tale with a standard blessing for the pilgrims suggesting an ever-ongoing discourse.

between reception and exemplary reproduction. As such, she is made to function as a site where one realm of knowledge is transformed into another with a different author. She begins to signify the Man of Law but only in a sense that diffuses that very proper and proprietary name into a shadow.⁴⁵

Near the end of the tale as he is about to be reunited with Constance, Alla ponders the mystery of this event:

"Parfay," thoghte he, "fantome is in myn heed!
 I oghte deme, of skilful juggement,
 That in the salte see my wyf is deed."
 And afterward he made his argument:
 "What woot I if that Crist have hyder ysent
 My wyf by see, as wel as he hire sente
 To my contree fro thennes that she wente?" (2.1037-42)

The passage confronts the notion of death as an absolute limit along traditional Christian lines of argument. Yet it also indicates how Christianity articulates its own ethic of death through the "fantome." We can now see that the phantom in his head is not merely the vision he has had of the woman he thought was dead, but also the "argument" that his new-found Christian faith instigates⁴⁶ through its twists and tropes that turn its narrative into theology. In this tale,

⁴⁵This reading of Constance grows out of my reading of Bronfen's chapter, "Preparation for an Autopsy."

⁴⁶This incident may be compared to miracles of the Holy Virgin in which typically, the Virgin appears in a vision to reinitiate proper Christian devotion and faith. See The Middle English Miracles of the Virgin and The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine.

the ghost that Constance must always exemplify is the ghost of logic that allows the Man of Law to repeat his tale while denying the disturbing implications of such repetition.

CHAPTER TWO
TEXTS AND PRETEXTS: THE MARIAN INFLECTION
IN CHAUCER'S ALISOUN OF BATH

In the Ellesmere manuscript tradition, The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale follow the Man of Law's tale of Constance. Those reading in this tradition move from a teller invested in the authority of example and tightly structured stories to a teller who questions the power of narration and written "auctoritee" (Fragment 3.Line 1). Alisoun of Bath begins her prologue by seeming to rely on a binary opposition between experience and authority, but as her personal history progresses, such neat binaries are broken down. As it reveals the secrets and strategies of being a wife, her narrative uses and abuses words of clerk and church, inflecting them with bodily appetites and personal desires. In this way her often self-contradictory prologue, set in counterpoint to the romance of her tale, calls readers' attentions to the conflicted arena of sexuality. Alisoun takes the Man of Law's strategy of exemplarity and uses it for her own purposes. The resulting tale foregrounds the textuality of authorities and of

bodies. In effect, she takes the traditional identification of women with linguistic errancy and shows this rhetorically culpable condition to be necessary to the engendering of meaning in narratives, including the most sacred stories of Christian tradition. In this way, her errant narrative--and errancy in general--may appear revelatory, and the character of the woman may upset spiritual tradition not (as tradition would have it) by violating it, but by faithfully observing the confused conceptions of corporeality on which it is based. The way Alisoun faithfully mimes exemplarity then has consequences for the general understanding of woman in Christian tradition, starting with the understanding of the that most exemplary woman, Mary.

Although nominally absent from Alisoun's tale--conspicuously so--Mary is very much a part of it. Therefore, to understand what is at stake in the way Alisoun tells her tale, we first have to be familiar with some of the key elements in Mary's narrative, such as her association with literature, the Annunciation and Incarnation, and the auricular insemination. For the same Mary that has served as a founding figure of Christian tradition has also proved troubling to that tradition, raising questions about its ability to represent coherent standards of "sameness" and "difference," especially when it comes to questions of corporeality and sexuality; and it is

because Mary has proved so troubling that Alisoun can be even more so.

The Trouble with Mary

Mary herself was often depicted as intimately connected with literature, particularly the act of reading:

"Uncountable paintings and sculptures of the Annunciation depict Mary as an avid reader" (Bell 154). By the fourteenth century, the image of Mary as a reader was common in iconography of the Annunciation (Bell 154; Schiller 1:42).

Anna and Joachim promised their child to the temple where Mary remained from the age of three until she was twelve.

The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew reveals that Mary was instructed there in the law of God. The N-Town's "The Presentation of Mary in the Temple" takes up this theme and develops it. Mary earns her place in the temple by being able to recite at the age of three (line 164) "þe fyftene grees [steps]" by which believers may ascend to be with God (97 & 102-61). Then the priest instructs her in proper trinitarian devotion (178-85) and the act of contrition (198-201) among other things, ending by telling her that she is there "to lerne þe goddys lawys and scrypture to rede" (209). By the fourteenth century, she was also believed to have been schooled in the prophecies of the Old Testament

and even in the seven liberal arts (Schiller 1:41-42). Even by the thirteenth century, representations occur in which Mary is shown reading Isaiah 7:14, which prophesies the virgin birth of Immanuel, enmeshing her sexuality in the necessities of Christian history.

Such necessities can be understood more fully by turning to medieval representations of the Annunciation and Incarnation. These were believed to be simultaneous events, as the Word of God was immediately translated into the body of Jesus. However, Mary's body cannot be elided from the process if Jesus is to be completely human. As we will see, female physiology marks the narrative in revealing ways. Grabar describes a common representation of the Annunciation in which the child is already present even as Gabriel speaks to Mary. Grabar finds the earliest evidence of this representation in the eastern church in the ninth century but claims that by the thirteenth century it was also prevalent in the western church. This representation is striking because it contains the image of the Holy ghost in the form of a bird or waves of light or both coming down to the praying Virgin within whose breast the child already resides. As Grabar proposes, "This surprising motif was a convention to represent--by transparency, as it were--the

future Child" (128).⁴⁷ However, that the image is created so that Jesus appears in anticipation in the Virgin's womb suggests the common belief that the Incarnation begins at the moment of the Annunciation. A twelfth-century eastern icon and the liturgy upon which it was based illustrate this tradition which the western church was to take up little more than a hundred years later. The liturgy reads, "As she heard the words of the archangel so she received in a supernatural manner in her undefiled womb the Son and the Word of God, his wisdom" (Schiller 1:44). The icon represents this idea by having Mary listen intently to Gabriel, and as she does so, she points to the Child inside her, visible through her garments. Similarly and more strikingly, Schiller describes an image from one twelfth-century missal in which

Mary of the Annunciation stand[s] on the snake. . . .
Below the Virgin and Gabriel, King Solomon appears,
holding a scroll with the text of Proverbs 9:1: "Wisdom
hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven
pillars." (1:41; figure 86)

These seven pillars foreshadow the fourteenth-century belief in Mary's instruction in the seven liberal arts, and their architectural resonance suggests that Mary is, herself, the house of Wisdom, the site of Jesus's residence on earth even at the moment of annunciation.

⁴⁷See also Schiller 1:45.

In addition to the visual images, the literature of the period also reflects this understanding of the Incarnation as simultaneous with the Annunciation. For example, a religious lyric dating from the first half of the fourteenth century and occurring in at least four manuscript versions speaks of Mary's joy upon learning from the angel that "crist" (26:6) has said that the "holi gost scholde in [her] bodi wende" (26:7), "wende" meaning "to pass into or change." Here, Christ even pre-exists the Annunciation and is, in fact, part of its cause, and yet he is also intimately tied to the mutable body of Mary. Similarly, an "Ave Maris Stella" dating from the first half of the century speaks of the "gretyn uncowpe / pat [to Mary] was sayd of Gabriel mowthe"--"the unknown greeting that was said to Mary out of Gabriel's mouth" (41:5-6) as the precipitating factor behind humanity being returned to "pes"--"peace" (41:7) and righting "be name of heue a-gayne"--"the name of Eve again" (41:8). A mid-century "Ave Maris Stella" repeats a similar sentiment:

Thurght gabrols mough and maine;
In pais þou put vs out paine,
Turnand þe name of eue againe. (45:6-8)

[Through Gabriel's mouth and strength, you put us out of pain into peace, turning the name of Eve again.]

Both of these lyrics refer to the typological connections between Eve and Mary. Typology produced a trope in which the

Virgin was understood to be the inversion of Eve, or her positive double. Mary turned the (original) sin of the world into salvation, turning "Eva" into "Ave."⁴⁸

By the time of Chaucer's early poem "An ABC" or "La Priere de Nostre Dame," the idea that the Annunciation and the Conception were simultaneous had found its way into popular literature. Chaucer writes in praise of the Virgin in his abecedarius that "the Holi Gost thee soughte / Whan Gabrielles vois cam to thin ere" (lines 114-15). In these examples, damnation, Annunciation, Incarnation, and salvation are all tied together and illustrate the complex semiosis that produces salvation: the greeting begins the bodily existence of salvational law and marks its ultimate fulfillment. This logic also reveals that only at the coincidence of the Word of God and human flesh that each is understood to be fulfilled.

Such visual representations grew out of readings of the gospels and the apocryphal gospels in which the Incarnation is assumed. These readings trace some of their origins back to interpretations of Psalms 45:10: "Hear, O daughter, consider, and incline your ear." This Psalm was interpreted to anticipate Mary's humility as well as the physiology of

⁴⁸For typical examples of this usage, see the Malleus Maleficarum, 44, and the N-Town's "The Parliament of Heaven," line 219.

her immediate auricular insemination with the Word. For example in Luke, the angel of the Annunciation, Gabriel, makes this assumption. He moves from the future tense of "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (1:35) to the past tense of "your kinswoman Elizabeth . . . has also conceived a son" (1:36). The Incarnation is a *fait accompli* once it has been announced to Mary and matched by her own words: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). In the Protevangelium, Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth soon after the Annunciation and Elizabeth at once recognizes the miraculous state of Mary's body, calling her "the mother of my Lord" (12:2). In the early fifth century Augustine was to write of the Annunciation that through it the "Word, the Beginning, made himself audible to the bodily ears of [humanity], so that they should believe in him and, by looking for him within themselves, should find him" (11.8). By the fourteenth century the insistence on the *conceptio per aurem* and its concomitant affective devotional practice was strong.⁴⁹

However, the auricular insemination also recalls original sin. From the perspective of Eve and the fall in

⁴⁹Warner traces the western development of this practice to Cistercian and Franciscan insistence on the humanity of Christ (210).

the garden, medieval semiotics paired women's sexuality with language, particularly its more errant operations. Mary's *conceptio per aurem* is another component of this system of making meaning. The Annunciation/Incarnation constitutes an attempt at a systemic recuperation of female sexuality and errant language; it provides the *antidotum* to the *venenum* permeating humanity ever since Eve's conversation with the serpent.¹⁰ The only way humanity may be saved from the concupiscence and mortality that arose from original sin is to be bought back by the singular body capable of making such a purchase. Or as Albertus Magnus (13th century) wrote in his tractatus on the incarnation:

omnes homines erant sub peccato; ergo, licet homo debuerit, tamen homo non potuit redimere; ergo oportuit, quod aliquis plus esset quam homo, qui deberet redimere. Sed INFRA probabitur, quod angelus non erat unibilis; ergo oportuit, quod esset deus et homo; ergo necesse fuit deum incarnari. (171)

[all men were living under sin; although man was in debt, man nevertheless was not able to buy [himself] back; therefore it was necessary that there be someone more than man who could buy [him] back. But below, it is proved that the angel was not capable of being united [to the flesh of man]; therefore, it was necessary that it be God and man; so, it was inevitable for God to be incarnated.]

Albertus's voice is a typical one among many in a long tradition of reasoning about God's human existence. Some

¹⁰See St. Bernard's (1090 - 1153) *Sermo II in festo Pentecostes*, quoted in Hirn (298).

eight hundred years earlier, Augustine wrote of humanity's inability to access God in any way "but dimly, through the clouds," making God's bodily existence (13.15) necessary for human understanding.

The sublative urge in these examples is evident. The argument is that God descended to the earth and condescended to take on the robe of flesh, "the pollution of the body" (Augustine 10.30). The idea of condescension suggested in this logic illustrates the Christian inflection of the classic Platonic hierarchical dichotomy of mind over body and the Aristotelian notion of form over matter. In the Christian tradition this hierarchy was translated into sexual difference as Adam, made first and "in [God's] own image" (Genesis 1:27), carried the divine form, while Eve, who was "taken out of Man" (Genesis 2:23), was associated with the flesh. The female's association with body and excess, led Paul to caution Timothy about the dangers of the way women dress and their speech (1 Timothy 2:9-15). With Paul's admonition that "a woman [should] learn in silence" matched by Augustine's later claim that "truth [is] something incorporeal" (7.20), we can imagine some of the cultural constraints placed on the woman as the silent body and the figurations that arise from this ethic.

The medieval concept of Mary, in her humility and servitude to God, is one such figuration, while anti-

feminist tropes represent the non-exemplary outcome of this epistemology. The interrelatedness of these discourses will be made clearer by understanding Mary's role in the Annunciation, particularly her vocation as a weaver, for in understanding the metaphor which ties clothing to maternal flesh we can begin to see some of the predicates of sexual difference that are transferred into the self-contradictory narrative of Alisoun of Bath.

As Caroline Walker Bynum points out in much of her writing,⁶¹ as much as dichotomies like mind/body, divine/human, and masculine/feminine were present and effective during the period so were crossings of the lines that created them:

Not only did theology, natural philosophy and folk tradition mingle male and female in their understanding of human character and human physiology, theological and psychological discussion also sometimes mingled body and soul. . . . [B]y the thirteenth century the prevalent concept of person was of a psychosomatic unity . . . ("Female Body" 183)

Using such metaphors as Jesus as mother or the female holy person as knight, religious practice and imagination in the Middle Ages often operated by invoking certain categories only so that those categories could be crossed, again reflecting the boundarylessness paradox at the heart of

⁶¹See particularly "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," "'And Woman His Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," and "The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages."

Christianity. Yet, concurrent with this practice are the many instances in which the dichotomies of soul/body, man/woman, and authority/experience, among others, remain as the defining controlling categories.

Mary is a prime example of how these categories were activated. As indicated by her education in Old Testament lore, Mary was the product and end of prophecy, subject to but definitive of Judaic law. More specifically, Mary was one of the "pure virgins of the tribe of David" asked to weave the "the scarlet and the true purple" (Protevangelium 10:1) of the temple veil. The Protevangelium explicitly connects Mary's weaving functions in the temple with the Annunciation. After beginning to spin the scarlet, one day Mary ventures out for some water:

And she took the pitcher and went forth to fill it with water: and lo a voice saying: Hail, thou that art highly favoured; the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

And she looked about her upon the right hand and upon the left to see whence this voice should be: and being filled with trembling she went to her house and set down the pitcher, and took the purple and sat down upon her seat and drew out the thread.

And behold an angel of the Lord stood before her saying, Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace before the Lord of all things, and thou shalt conceive of his word. (11:1-2)

Mary then asks the angel if she will conceive like other women to which the angel responds that she will not because instead she will be "overshadowed" (11:2) by the Lord. Then follows, as in Luke, her acceptance of her role.

This passage illustrates two interrelated things, one of which is the growth even by the time of this second-century apocryphal gospel (James 38) of the story of Mary. The Annunciation scene in Luke is clear that Mary "will conceive in [her] womb and bear a son" (1:31). However, the angel's announcement in the passage from the Protevangelium mentions nothing about a human birth; Mary makes this assumption when she asks how she will conceive and give birth. This small change marks a striking modification in Mary's story since the gospels were written: her sexuality has more clearly moved into a semiotic field. In taking a look at the semiosis of the Marian cult in her essay "*Stabat Mater*," Julia Kristeva reads this as a type of bypass of the female body, saying that thus female "sexuality is brought down to the level of innuendo" (173). Nevertheless, I suggest that Mary's body is never bypassed completely, however strongly the urge toward its sublation may be represented. In the dramas the condition of Mary's body is a constant concern and the connection between weaving and the Incarnation--the second significance of the above passage from the Protevangelium--provides another insight into the import of Marian flesh.

In the N-Town's "The Salutation and Conception" and York's "The Annunciation, and Visit of Elizabeth to Mary,"

the state of Mary's body continues to be of great concern. In the N-Town play, Mary is astounded at Gabriel's words that she "xal conceyve in [her] wombe indede / A childe, þe sone of þe Trynyté" (lines 239-40-). She responds

In what manere of wyse xal þis be?
For knowyng of man I haue non now:
I haue evyrmore kept and xal my virginyté.
I dowte not þe wordys 3e han seyð to me,
But I aske how it xal be do. (246-50)

The York play follows suit, both in Gabriel's announcement and in Mary's response. Mary does add an emphasis on knowing and speaking the truth, "the sothe to saye," about her "maydenhode" (174) and on the specter of Eve when she claims not to be "fyled" by "werkis wilde" (173 & 175). Both plays end the scene with a focus on the words of the angel and Mary's acceptance of them.⁵² The errancy of female flesh would seem to be recuperated by the Word of God.

Similarly Mary's weaving seems to be another way that female flesh is brought back into the heavenly fold. As I have suggested above, the Protevangelium connects the vocation of weaving with the Incarnation itself. Schiller collects many images based upon the Protevangelium's version of the story, many of them showing Mary holding the

⁵²In the N-Town Mary says "Aftyr þi worde be it don to me" (288) In York, she says "Be done to me of all manere, / Thurgh thy worde als þou hast saide" (191-92).

spindle.⁵³ Medieval lyrics illustrate ways in which the period figured Mary's weaving of Jesus. In Brown's fourteenth century collection, the Incarnation is presented a clothing metaphor in two poems. An "Orison to the Blessed Virgin" attempts to represent the mysteries of salvation by claiming that Jesus took on the "robe" of human flesh (16:19 & 48) and that Mary "3eue hym my wede," the clothing of humanity (16:31). The narrator of a short poem from later in the century (1372) wishes to be "clad in cristes skyn" (71:3) in order to better understand Christ's suffering on the cross. These examples illustrate that although "Wearing the tissue of . . . flesh" (Augustine, Confessions 13:15) was not the primary figure for speaking of the Incarnation, it was one with some currency.

This clothing metaphor suggests an incidental quality to the flesh of God: as that which is mutable, it cannot also be intrinsic to the transcendent Godhead. Yet the fallibility of the flesh, originating with Eve, instigated the need for salvation and therefore instigated the salvational narrative itself. Mary represents a sublated version of this flesh; merely mutable and not fallible, she

⁵³See pages 35-38 & figures 52, 71-73, & 156 (with a basket of wool instead of a spindle). Even though these are works from the early church, Schiller contends that they influenced medieval representation, as the passages from lyrics I cite below illustrate.

bodily enacts not only salvation but also the narrative desire for it in her conjunction with Eve.

The cultural inheritance of this relationship with Eve is represented in the cycle dramas, particularly in Mary's relationship with Joseph. As Theresa Coletti points out in writing about the English mystery cycle dramas, these plays often present a Mary who has a life that is not so different from that of some of the plays' viewers (75-76). The mother of God, she is blamed by her husband for being such a foolish young woman as to be tricked by a young handsome man calling himself an angel. Further, Joseph's reaction to seeing his wife pregnant is merely typical of community standards. That God would have condescended to be embodied through the medium of a woman's body, especially one that lactated and menstruated,⁵⁴ remained a prevalent topic of disputation in the period. Mary is simultaneously the Queen of Heaven, medium of salvation for mankind, and its inverse--the concupiscence of female carnality. The York cycle play "Joseph's Trouble about Mary" concentrates on the relationship between husband and wife. This play begins with a long lament by the "elde, / Wayke and al vnwelde [infirm]" (lines 5-6) Joseph on how unlucky he is to have been wed to a young wife, a complaint that Alisoun of Bath will inflect

⁵⁴See Charles T. Wood's famous essay on the physiological femaleness of Mary's body.

in some revealing ways in her prologue and tale. His complaints grow from his knowledge that Mary is pregnant and has become so while he was away. His main concern is over the "shame" and "blame" (54 & 60) that will fall on him when her pregnancy is discovered. The N-Town expands on this fear of communal retribution with its "Trial of Mary and Joseph." Both Joseph and Mary, revered as the holy parents by the play's audience even as the two are denigrated during the drama, are blamed for their sexual appetites. Detractors call Joseph an "olde shrewe" who is so "anameryd" with Mary that he must have her (82 & 83). Similarly, Mary is "a 3onge damesel of bewté bryght" who is so "fresch and fayr" that she would cause even "A 3onge man to haue delyght" (94 & 91 & 93). Once Joseph has proven his innocence by passing a test of drinking a holy potion (230-57), the detractors and judges turn their attention to Mary. She must ask twice before being allowed to prove her innocence in the same way as Joseph (294 & 333). In between her requests, one of her detractors makes jokes about how she might have gotten pregnant, while one of the lawyers brings her own body as evidence against her:

Du art with chylde we se in syght;
 To us þi wombe þe doth accuse!
 Þer was nevyr woman 3itt in such plyght
 Þat from mankynde hyre kowde excuse. (302-05)

Such legal proceedings recall Eve and the origination of the belief in the errancy of female flesh. That the audience knows that Mary is innocent, as those in the courtroom soon discover after Mary drinks the holy potion, provides the sublative element that solidifies the Christian mystery of the virgin birth. Similarly, in the York play, Joseph knows "thurgh prophicie" that "A maiden clene suld bere a childe" (61 & 62), but cannot believe the words his wife speaks until Gabriel visits him and reveals the truth or "soth" (277) of his wife's pregnant body to him.

Even as such scenes recuperate the errancy of female flesh, they also serve to establish this errancy or indeterminacy as the foundation of salvation. Given that the displacement of this errancy onto the flesh and more specifically onto female flesh can be understood as a defining moment of sexual difference, Mary's corporeality remains troubling. Coletti argues on the general level that "Mary emerges as a sign of difference, of the irreconcilability of matter and spirit, the human and the divine" (86). I would add to this the specific of sexual difference because as the evidence from the cycle plays attests, the main contention is over the state of her body and the responsibility for it. Even though Joseph's reputation may be at stake, Mary's obviously pregnant state is the one truth of each of the plays' scenes that is never

contested. It sets her off from her elder husband and the larger community of her male detractors in a way that cannot be confirmed or denied by a holy potion even after she has proved her sexual innocence.

Chaucer's Tale of Melibee renders this idea of female physiology just barely under control as Dame Prudence addresses her husband saying, "For certes, sire, oure Lord Jhesu Crist wolde nevere have descended to be born of a womman, if all wommen hadden been wikke" (7.1073). The writers of the fifteenth-century treatise on witchcraft, the Malleus Maleficarum, interpret this accidental quality as follows:

And it should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib . . . bent as it were in a contrary direction to a man. (44)

This passage is a typical outgrowth of Platonic dualistic inheritance and the misogyny that followed from it. In the way that it is representative of the cultural milieu that produced it, this passage suggests something very revealing about the dichotomous gender system upon which it operates. Even within the pre-lapsarian Adam, the supposed unsullied human original from all humans derive as copies, the possibility of accident was present and came to bear. This accidental quality becomes the threat of the flesh. This risk seems always to have been possible, and is in some

sense a necessary possibility if the substance, or what Christian doctrine would understand as non-accidental occurrences like Mary's story, is to be significant. The Incarnation, as well as its concomitant narratives that seal Mary's body, evidence the narrative tendency to sublimate the flesh and accident. Yet, the embodiment of this sublation in the yoking of Eve and Mary indicates a complex and powerful relationship among figuration, bodies and faith. The negative and positive poles at which Eve and Mary stand can then be understood as parts of an ongoing process that creates them as original and teleological.

Realizing not just the presence of such binary categories and where and how they are transgressed but also the very structure of those categories can serve to denaturalize them. Like the body of Jesus, God incarnate, the spiritually necessary body of Mary blurs boundaries; but Mary--with the gendered emphasis on her body as mere matter and the blame and shame she suffers for her pregnancy--also embodies the dichotomies as well as their blurring. Like Mary's story, Alisoun of Bath's Prologue and Tale similarly point to the articulations of the discourses that define her; she speaks against some of the very things she seems to be and in so doing shifts the ground of understanding and places ostensibly natural categories under pressure. As she tries to articulate what being the woman she is is like, we

can begin to understand the errancy in her speech as reflective of the underlying indeterminacy of gender roles.

In the introduction to her book Chaucer's Sexual Poetics, Carolyn Dinshaw takes a look at the intersection of some of these prescribed roles, tracing the thoughts of several medieval writers on the dangers of the body, particularly the female body, and its relationship to ways of reading. She highlights "the patristic association of the surface of the text (the letter) with carnality (the flesh, the body), and carnality with woman" (21). While my reading certainly does not deny the potency of such anti-feminist constructions, examining the ways in which they have been articulated and solidified can provide another mode of understanding what is at stake in their formation. Reading the texts of these discourses and other texts with the weight of Marian imagery behind them can provide a frame through which to see the materiality not only of the text but also of its truths and to see that, like the vagrancy of female flesh, its possibilities lie in its dangers. So while what Dinshaw says may be true:

literary activity has a gendered structure, a structure that associates acts of writing and related acts of signifying--allegorizing, interpreting, glossing, translating²⁵--with the masculine and that identifies

²⁵Mary is represented as actively engaging in several of these "masculine" pursuits. She is the mediatrix between humans and her son, involved in interpreting his love and

the surfaces on which these acts are performed, or from which these acts depart, or which these acts reveal--the page, the text, the literal sense, or even the hidden meaning--with the feminine. (Dinshaw 9)

Nevertheless, the polyvalent and juxtapositional functions of Mary's body as a signifier can offer a somewhat different perspective from which to view the congruence of texts and bodies. The necessities of Mary's physiology affect her story and therefore highlight not just the process of signification being performed on bodies but also the potential of those bodies to signify and to recirculate meanings. In effect, what this look at the representations surrounding Mary's body can foreground is that what Dinshaw calls the "hidden meaning" and the "literal sense" are coterminous. In other words, the act of making something signify is also the act of being signified. Neither the idea of a prediscursive body and its gender nor of an all-inclusive language remains untouched once both are seen as series of junctures. An investigation of ways in which Alisoun of Bath's story seems to double Mary's will reveal similar junctures thus undoing the logic of the double.

justice to them and their penitence to him. She is also often associated with the translational process of conversion.

The Trouble with Alisoun

How big is the step from The Holy Virgin Mary to Alisoun of Bath's inquiry into "virginitie"? Mary seems conspicuously absent in the Wife's 162-line investigation that mentions virginity six times (Fragment 3. lines 62, 72, 82, 91, 105, 142) and Jesus four times (3.10, 15, 107, 139, 146), even remarking on his being "a mayde" (139).

Similarly, later in her prologue, she speaks of

. . . Eva first, that for hir wikkednesse
Was al mankynde broght to wrecchednesse,
For which that Jhesu Crist hymself was slayn,
That boghte us with his herte blood agayn. (715-18)

Typically, as the examples from the Malleus Maleficarum and several of the lyrics cited earlier illustrate, Mary was seen as the one who turned "Eva" to "Ave," or as the inverse of Eve and her sin, while Jesus was commonly figured as Adam's inverse.

Virginity, Jesus, Eve, and sin--the text leaves out Mary, the central embodiment of the narrative of salvation. The woman who openly talks about her body and its functions seems to leave out the matrix of the Godhead in her brief history of the fall and redemption of humanity. In two essays Melvin Storm has developed some convincing textual connections between Alisoun and Mary. In "Alisoun's Ear" Storm argues that the Wife's deafness is a sign of her

unregenerate spiritual state and faulty intellectual capabilities. By tracing out a long line of patristic thinking that equates good "hearing with the apprehension of truth" (220), Storm's conclusion is that the Wife, hearing in only one ear, is deaf to the salvational new law (224). In contrast, of course, Mary's ear was most profoundly open to receive the Word of God. This acceptance implies her wholly regenerative nature and her recursively established ability to learn and live by the law.

In "The Miller, The Virgin, and the Wife of Bath," Storm develops parallels between Alison of the Miller's Tale and Alisoun of Bath to support his conclusion that "the Wife of Bath is the true inversion of Mary" (297). He cites several previous studies on parallels between the Miller's Alison and Mary (291-92) and then develops further parallels between the two characters of the Canterbury Tales. Again the issue of the Wife's hearing is the focus. Among other likenesses she shares with the Holy Virgin, the Miller's Alison is compared to a "wezele" (1.3234), an animal that was believed to conceive through the ear and give birth through the mouth "just as the Virgin was envisioned as conceiving through the whispering of an angel or dove representing the Holy Ghost and, in turn, giving birth to the Word Incarnate" (292). The likenesses Alison shares with Alisoun of Bath are numerous and include "details of

character, of appearance, . . . of speech, and . . . shared social circumstance" (293). Storm concludes that with the "intermediate parody" (297) of the Miller's Alison, the Wife of Bath is brought into stark contrast with Mary. Her "deafness, her evident barrenness, and her unregenerate nature" (297) all recall the Annunciation and her distance from salvation.

While the thematic and patristic evidence that Storm compiles convincingly indicates that his reading is a valid and insightful one, it focuses on how the context of Marian imagery provides Alisoun of Bath's story with a frame of understanding. However, as the previous examinations of Mary's life story and her relation to Eve have shown, the Virgin is no less a textual creation than is the Wife. Further examination of the narrative existence of these characters will show the interdependence between the oppositional members of binary systems; specifically, the Wife of Bath's sometimes confusing and contradictory prologue and story illuminate the narratively constructed character of gender.

My synopses of Storm's articles have already illustrated some important textual and thematic connections between Mary and Alisoun. The Wife's unregenerate characteristics recall the original sin of Eve, but as evidenced by the overdetermined existence of the virtuous

Constance, the relationship between an exemplary maiden and a sinful wife is more complex than that of a simple hierarchical binary. In the same way that, as I have shown previously, Mary's body, marked by the curse of Eve, authorizes and yet jeopardizes the telos of salvation, Alisoun of Bath's conspicuously self-reflexive autobiography also recalls the life story of the Holy Virgin. Alisoun, like Mary, is a weaver of fine cloth (1.447), but more telling than this and the other textual similarities I have previously indicated is the similar way that the textual bodies of both women represent but also refashion the changing textures of their cultures. Where Mary is the juxtaposition of "Glorious mayde and mooder" ("An ABC," line 49), "doghter of [her] Sone" (Second Nun's Prologue, 8.36), Alisoun embodies the paradox of exemplifying some of the same anti-feminist tropes against which she argues. The stories of both women revolve around secrets--how and how well they are kept. Mary may wish to keep "all . . . things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19), but her pregnant body reveals her inner secrets to a suspicious husband and a legislative community. Alisoun reveals truths about her body--where she has the marks of Venus and Mars and their significance (lines 604-626)--but only under the guise of "pleye" and only after warning that "For half so boldely kan ther no man / Swere and lyen, as a womman kan" (227-28).

Both women are readers and are read to; both have divinely ordained bodies; both share a bodily and revelatory relationship to statements of truth. Both Mary and Alisoun are, on the surface, seemingly contradictory, seemingly bound by categories that they also break apart. As previous portions of this project have made clear, Mary's story suggests a polyvalence but only through repetition of regulatory, normative discourses. This contrariness pressures the very logic that produces the original categories. Specifically, in the confusion of texts, bodies, and truths that Alisoun represents, some of what is taken for granted about gender roles comes under pressure.

The Wife of Bath's autobiography and the tale she tells as her offering to the game that comprises the frame of the Canterbury Tales initiate the question of gender by highlighting the culturally constructed character of gender. Her discussion of the debate over why "membres . . . of generacion" (116) were created implies an understanding that bodies cannot be said to have a signifiabie existence prior to their being inserted into a recognizable set of discourses:

Glose whoso wole, and seye bothe up and doun,
That they were maked for purgacioun
Of uryne, and oure bothe thynges smale
Were eek to knowe a femele from a male,
And for noon oother cause, - say ye no?
The experience woot wel it is noht so.
So that the clerkes be nat with me wrothe,

I sey this, that they maked ben for bothe,
 This is to seye, for office, and for ese
 Of engendrure, ther we nat God displese. (119-28)

The rather technical use of "purgacioun" (3.120), "uryne" (3.121), and "femele" and "male" (3.122), even when mixed with colloquialisms like "thynges smale" (3.121), intimates the way in which scientific discourse affects the perception of basic differences between men and women. Medieval physiological research focused on discovering the essential function of any organ. Organs functioned less as a part of an individual body and more as manifestations of eternal forms (Jacquart & Thomasset 7-47). The Wife's attention to organ purpose recalls this scientific and etymological system of ordering the world. Invoking the name of God, mixing this theology with science and adding her own perspective on sex, she reminds her audience of the interdependence between modes of discourse and human desires.

She uses scientific and theological terminology as well as the euphemism of "thynges smale." Later she will refer to her own "thyng" with the euphemisms "*bele chose*" and "*quoniam*" (3.510 & 608). These lines bring to the fore the many complex ways in which the body was textualized. The physiology itself is another term in a culturally determined, not solely physiologically based, set of

differences. The "membres" have similar functions in excretion and similar goals in sex but are different in form. From the perspective offered in this passage, sexual organs do not carry significance outside a dualistic referential framework. Alisoun had begun her analysis with a phrase--"Glose whoso wole"--that indicates the perspectival nature of the significances of body parts. She concludes her discussion with a passage that illustrates clearly an understanding of the interdependence between semiotic systems, their figurations, and the bodies that manifest them:

Why sholde men . . . in hir bookes sette
That man shal yelde to his wyf hire dette?
Now wherwith sholde he make his paiement,
If he ne used his sely instrument? (129-32)

The body, specifically the sexual body, seems to hold no value until entered in the ledger book and brought into a bargain with another body. What seems to hold the ideas about gender in place in this passage is diffused across several culturally constructed spectrums. "Bookes" and whoever will "Glose" them--and the bodies set in them--become the contextual anchors of what is signified by the words "man" and "woman."²⁰ Alisoun's parodic repetition of the words of authority--science, theology, economy--and of

²⁰My reading here builds on Butler's theory of the fictive quality of what is perceived as an abiding substance of gender (16-25).

her own experience--"ese" or pleasure in intercourse-- reveals that both are simulacra of the idea of the natural, the original, or what is "right ynogh" (line 2).

What does it mean to have a certain set of instruments if they make sense only in relation to another set? Medieval medical practice held the female reproductive system to be an inversion of the male. Galen (circa second century A.D.) provides a foundation for later physiological analyses, saying, "in women the parts are within [the body], whereas in men they are outside" (2:628).⁷ In the fourteenth century Henri de Mondeville and Guy de Chauliac, surgeons, wrote "The apparatus of generation in women is like the apparatus of generation in men, except that it is reversed" and "the womb is like a penis reversed or put inside" (qtd. in Bynum, "Female" 220). Medieval scientific views, based on Aristotelian and Christian presuppositions, held the male body to be paradigmatic, holding the image of God in the semen. Yet, this paradigmatic form is also the body that in Eden had the potential to produce the inexact copy of Eve and that each day continues to have the potential to produce the "imperfect[ion]" and "mutilat[ion]" (Galen 2:630) of the female body. The male body and the female body were, therefore, versions of the same thing. However, as the

⁷This and all subsequent quotations from Galen are from May's translation.

entirety of Alisoun's prologue indicates, men and women are different. The distinction between "femele" and "male" (3.122), then, must be located somewhere besides in just the body.

Given this underlying tendency, Alisoun's discussion of virginity (3.1-118 & *passim*) is revealing in the way that it unmasks some of the insecurities of the dominant cultural definitions of gender. Alisoun's description of her first three husbands exemplify such insecurities and illustrate the potency of parodic repetition. As she proudly tells of the way she controlled these older men, she repeats typical lines from anti-feminist discourses, illustrating the ostensibly mutually exclusive categories to which women are subject. She complains about a strictly negative view of women. If a woman is "povre" then she will be expensive to keep (line 249); if she is "riche" then the man must "soffre hire pride and hire malencolie" (250-52); if fair, then unchaste because all the bachelors will chase after her; if foul, then also unchaste because like "a spanyel" (267) she will leap on any man who presents himself. These few examples are indicative of the compendium of anti-feminism that the Wife collects. But the Wife is also astute enough to question the source of these examples. She asks

Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?
By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,

As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
 They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
 Than al the mark of Adam may redresse. (3.692-96)

Her question and conclusion contest the singular authority of "auctoritee." Authorship in this passage is not attributed to divine cause and connection but to specifics of class--"clerkes"--and place--"oratories"--not to mention gender.

Alisoun constantly struggles with a husband, Jankyn, her fifth, who, with an attitude much like the Man of Law's, reads to his wife the exemplary stories of detestable women. She mentions some of his favorites: Eve, "Dianyre" (3.725), "Xantippa" and her "pisse" pot (3.729), "Phasipha" and her sexual abominations (3.733), and "Clitermystra" (3.737). She complains how he would read his book "with ful good devocioun" (3.739) and was full of "mo proverbes / Than in this world ther growen gras or herbes" (3.773-74). Jankyn's reliance on examples and proverbs seems very much like Joseph's and the judges' reliance on empirical evidence and the words of law as they try to determine Mary's fate. This is a reliance on the authority of "auctoritee," that is, on the words of the "Men [who] devyn and glosen, up and doun" (26), on the paraphrase of interpreters who provide the "rubriche" (346) by which to know the text without having to read its entirety, on the words in Jankyn's book by old

clerks who write bad things about women when they "may noght do / Of Venus werkes worth [their] olde sho" (707-08).

Alisoun, however, realizes the slippery nature of exemplarity as a strategy of world building as her question "Who painted the lion?" points out. She realizes that "Thus goth al to the devel, by *thy* tale" (262, my emphasis), emphasizing the limits and perspectival nature of even the most standard of beliefs. Alisoun may understand the "mark of Adam" (3.696) better than Adam's own descendants, those men who continue to try to write the world. Most simply this mark refers to the image of Adam, or all humans. But certainly within this passage that so aggressively attacks the perspective certain men, the "clerkes," have of women, the "mark of Adam" is gendered specifically male. In the Wife's narrative, men are the ones writing, glossing, and painting rubrics, and yet, they are also the ones who, like the Man of Law, seem not to understand the narrative character of the values they hold to be true. We might, then, understand the "mark" also to have to do with writing. In contrast, the strategy that Alisoun has for dealing with her husbands indicates a different way of relating to the world and establishing values. She takes her husbands' and the clerks' definitions and examples and throws them back in the men's faces to get what she wants from them, be it money

or freedom to visit whom she pleases. She says she "quitte [her husbands] word for word" (3.422), and she *quittes* Jankyn mark for mark, blow for blow in their fight (3.788-808). Indeed, her whole prologue, with its incorrect citations, misquotes, and mistranslations, relies on using the strategy of exemplarity and the words of the clerks, but her appropriation and misuse (from the clerks' perspective) of this strategy indicates the limits of this discourse and its mores. As she mimes this strategy, "pynche[s]" (1.326) at it, transforming it into something to serve her purposes, her "ensamples mo than ten" (3.179) serve to pluralize exemplarity and unfold the ostensibly unified discourse of gender. Her experience inflects her use of *auctoritee* and, thus, breaks it apart. She matches the "mark of Adam" with "Martes [Mars'] mark upon [her] face, / And also in another privee place" (3.619-20) and "the prente of seinte Venus seel" (3.604), remarking the discourse of clerks with her body. Yet she does not simply argue in favor of experience over authority; more explicitly what her prologue does is illustrate the overdetermined nature of the relationship between bodies and words. Whereas Marian figuration works by sublating its reliance on Eve's errant body--that is, hiding the indispensable status of bodies and words in the formulation of transcendence--the Wife of Bath's Prologue

and Tale emphasize this relationship and so begin to break it apart. Alisoun's similarity to the period's image of Eve calls attention to the semiotic networks that produce not only binary gender formations but also moral distinctions within them. Like Eve, Alisoun is a supplement of Mary, a representative of the transgressive potential of female flesh that makes Mary's virginity valuable. Alisoun, in the tradition of Eve, provides a counterpoint--or part of the recognizable set of discourses--that can make the paradox of Mary's body mean something.

The figurative status of such moral distinctions can be further clarified by an investigation of the use of substitutes or doubles in the stories of Mary and the Wife. Each has an older confidante who advises her younger counterpart and acts as a sounding board for their revelations of secrets, "mysteries" (Protevangelium 12:2), and "privetee" (Wife of Bath's Prologue 3.531). Before we can understand the way in which "doubling" covers over an overdetermined discursive network, we need to consider the details of this doubling strategy and the narrative inevitability it insinuates and jeopardizes.

Elizabeth serves as Mary's mirror. Like Mary, her old friend was known as a weaver of scarlet cloth (Protevangelium 12:2). Like her younger counterpart, Elizabeth becomes pregnant miraculously, but in contrast to

Mary the miracle of her pregnancy is that it occurs "in her old age" (Luke 1:36). Each woman's son has a unique but interrelated function in the world: John was the singular prophet for the only son of God. Elizabeth is the first, besides Mary and Gabriel, to proclaim "the divinity of the Child that Mary will bear" (Grabar 131), a proclamation simultaneous with the joyful leap the fetus in her womb makes (Luke 1:44). Like Mary, Elizabeth seems also very familiar with prophecies; she declares that one reason Mary is blessed is that she "believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Luke 1:45). In Luke, after Elizabeth makes this declaration, Mary sings the "*Magnificat*," amplifying the prophecy of her miraculous pregnancy from Isaiah 7:14. Mary is similarly mirrored by her mother, Anna, who also becomes pregnant miraculously and gives birth to one who is "alone of all her sex".⁵⁴ These instances of amplifying supposedly unique characteristics onto multiple characters suggest a diffuse web at the base of singular miracles. As the ideal is represented in the reproduction of faith, it is pluralized; thus, even as faith grows, the unity of transcendence is

⁵⁴The *Protevangelium*, 4:1, tells the story of Anna's blessing from God. After Anna prays to become pregnant, an angel appears to her, saying, "Anna, Anna, the Lord that hearkened unto thy prayer, and thou shalt conceive and bear, and thy seed shall be spoken of in the whole world."

undermined. The specific examples cited above concerning miraculous pregnancies and fulfilled prophecies insinuate a discursive inevitability of these narrated events but only at the intersection of the textual suggestion and its processing by an audience. For Mary the prophecies are the texts by which she--and her husband and the Jewish community in the cycle dramas--can make sense of the "mysteries" (Protevangelium 12:2) of her life. At the same time, however, it is only in Mary that the prophecies are sensible, that is, apprehensible to the faithful "face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Alisoun of Bath is similar to Mary in the way that her prologue seems to embody certain narrative inevitabilities but also illustrates effects of sensibility as a matrix for narrative. By her own testimony, Alisoun exemplifies some of the anti-feminist stereotypes against which she rails. For example, after calling the words of clerks "lyes" (302) (and after saying all women lie [line 228]), she describes herself as a woman after money and sex, saying "I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun" (622). She seems to provide additional evidence for any anti-feminist clerks who might be listening. Alisoun is a character of repetition. As I have already argued, in both the way she says she lives her life and in the argument she makes against them, Alisoun repeats the discourses of anti-feminism. Indeed, the

character of the Wife is a repetition of a stock character. A quick survey of the explanatory notes in any standard edition of the Canterbury Tales will teach that the main source for her character is that of La Vieille in Jean de Meun's portion of Le Roman de la Rose. La Vieille is an old "trot," a woman too old to participate in the game of love any longer but who still associates herself with sexual pleasures, often by instructing young women in everything from proper table manners to cosmetics, from how to catch a man to how to abort a child.⁵⁹ Alisoun also repeats the words of Jerome, the mysterious Theophrastus, and Walter Map. Yet as the previous discussion of the Annunciation illustrates, by illustrating the potency of a singular manifestation of any discourse, to repeat is not merely to reinscribe.⁶⁰

In the Marian mode, the faithful have recourse to the truth that God represents, but when Alisoun of Bath begins to hold forth, truth seems to disappear, broken into little bits and scattered. Her story, like Mary's, uses and undermines notions of unity. The Wife's presentation, with

⁵⁹See Rowland's introduction to Medieval Woman's Guide to Health for a more complete discussion on the etymology of this name (4).

⁶⁰My reading here builds on the reading practices developed by Derrida in "Limited Inc a b c . . ." and Irigaray in "This Sex which Is Not One."

its emphasis on not only the Christian God, but also on the gods of romance and war, Venus and Mars, and human reasoning about gods--not to mention that this all is told in "pleye" (192)--illustrates how "the truth" breaks apart in everyday life. One way this is achieved in the narrative is through the many characters that seem to mirror Alisoun. Most apparently is the Wife's "gossib" (3.529), who is also named Alisoun and who shares the Wife's "privetee" (3.531), as Elizabeth did Mary's. This gossib--meaning both "confidante" and "gossip"--mirrors the Wife in name, in knowledge, and in practice, aiding her charge in landing her fifth husband. In the tale she tells, the Wife is doubled by Midas's wife in the excursion the tale makes into Ovid, by the old woman who knows the secret of what "wommen moost desiren" (905), and even by the young woman into which the old one turns at the tale's end. All these images of the Wife in combination with all of her own self-stylized pictures of her own life and opinions on commerce, society, religion, and men and women combine into a character named "The Wife of Bath," at the same time that they disperse that title.

As a wife, Alisoun mirrors Mary in several ways. The belief in Mary and Joseph's chaste marriage forced medieval legal theorists to reformulate marriage law.⁴ Earlier

⁴See Gold for a full description of some of these reformulations and their effects on married couples in the

investigations in this chapter have illustrated ways in which Mary & Joseph's legal union took on some typical characteristics of marriage. Even the pedagogical cycle dramas used anti-feminism to educate their viewers. One way that Alisoun mirrors Mary is in her first three marriages to older men. The type of the old husband and the young wife, of which Joseph and Mary are the prime examples, is one that Chaucer used in several of the Canterbury Tales; the Miller's "legende and . . . lyf / Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf" (1.3141-42) of John and Alisoun² and the Merchant's tale of January and May are two of the most well known. The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale repeat and vary this type in some revealing ways. With her first three husbands, Alisoun is the young wife, married to the older mistrusting husband. Like Mary who has recourse under Joseph's pressuring over who impregnated her to ask her serving maids to speak for her,³ Alisoun takes "witnesses of [her] owene mayde" (3.233) when accused of misdoing. In such situations, as in the "Trial of Joseph and Mary," going beyond her maids's testimony, Mary relies on the prophecies

period.

²See Storm's "The Miller, The Virgin, and the Wife of Bath" for a detailed analysis of further connections between Mary and Joseph and the Miller's Alisoun and John.

³See "Joseph's Trouble about Mary," from the York Plays (lines 79-88 & 112-33).

about and her bodily knowledge of the incarnate God while Joseph acts the typical Old Cuckold scenario.⁶⁴ In contrast, Alisoun does anything but keep silent about her husbands' lack of perception. Instead she uses it to gain control of her life. Yet in the cycle drama version of Mary's story and in Alisoun's autobiography the results are the same: Joseph's character like that of Alisoun's older husbands is shown to be fictionalized. The status of mimesis is brought into question.

By the end of her prologue and in the penultimate episode of her tale, however, Alisoun has reversed this type. She and the old "wyf" of her tale (3.998, 1066, 1082, 1086, 1088, 1090) marry young men. This reversal recalls the many roles into which Mary was figured in relation to Jesus. She was perceived to be not only his mother but also his daughter, and wife. Since Jesus came to save humanity, he saved, or gave life to, all humans, including Mary; in this way he was a maternal figure. As an emblem of human perfection, Mary came to represent the future perfection of humanity, specifically the church, which Christ would wed upon his return to earth.⁶⁵ From this eschatological

⁶⁴Nauman discusses fully this tradition and others that are used to represent Joseph's role in the York cycle.

⁶⁵In her chapter "The Song of Songs," Warner gives specific examples of these representations.

perspective, Mary predates her elder husband and may be understood to be just as fictionalized or narrativized as the Old Cuckold stereotype Joseph reflects. Additionally, in both the York and N-Town cycles Mary must again and again remind Joseph of the miracle she represents. As our earlier examinations of his doubt have illustrated, apparently regardless of his faith, Joseph cannot accept the consequence of the human and the divine that Mary manifests. Her continuous repetition of phrases as thoroughly standard as "it is Goddis will" ("The Journey to Bethlehem; the Birth of Jesus" York Cycle, line 38) leads Joseph into his final acceptance of the absolute singularity of the child she will bear and the salvation it represents. Again, the efficacy of the singular iteration is emphasized.

Similarly, the loathly lady at the end of Alisoun's tale of a knight and his felonies teaches her young husband by repeating standard, if not proverbial, bits of wisdom about "gentillesse" (1109). Besides calling on the name of "Jhesus" (1181), she invokes the names of "Dant" (1126), "Valerius" (1165), "Senek," "Boece" (1169), and "Juvenal" (1192). With all these examples to support her point about character being more important than birthright, her wedding night speech to her husband recalls the form and concerns of a sermon, like those of the Parson's Tale (10.460-74). This sermon is matched by the generic concerns of the tale that

surrounds it. The Wife tells a romance, full of magic and culminating with marriage. What happens to transform this knight into a "gentil man" (1116) is set "In th'olde dayes" (857) when the land was full of "fayerye" (859), mysteries, and miracles; when women could transform men and themselves. The young knight, a proven rapist doomed to death for his crime, saves his life by listening to the secrets of an old "wyf" (3.998). To "keep [his] nekke-boon from iren" (3.906), the knight is charged with learning "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (3.905). As he searches for an answer to this question to save himself from certain death, he sees in a clearing "ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo" dancing (3.992). He draws towards them in order to learn their "wysdom" (3.994), but as he draws near, they all disappear leaving only the old wyf. In the same way that "the pillars of male authority, the discourse of Church, government and the written word" strive toward consolidation (Straus 530), the twenty-four seem to be turned into a stereotype of anti-feminism--an ugly old woman who wishes to marry the young man. The knight plights his troth to her, not yet knowing she will ask for marriage from him, and she gives him the life-redeeming information: "Tho rowned [whispered] she a pistel [message] in his ere / And bad hym to be glad and have no fere" (3.1021-22). Recalling representations of the Incarnation with its emphasis on the ear, redemption, and

the messenger's assurance that there is nothing to fear, this scene exemplifies Alisoun's story-telling strategy. The old wife and the scene itself mime and transplant the phallogocentric discourse of church and clerks (dispersed earlier in the prologue as the Wife mimes its strategies), pluralizing them through allusive figuration. The end of the tale matches this strategy also and recalls the Wife's earlier stance on the members of generation. The old wife offers her new young husband two choices. She says

Chese now . . . oon of thise thynges tweye:
 To han me foul and old til that I deye,
 And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf,
 And nevere yow displese in al my lyf,
 Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,
 And take youre aventure of the repair
 That shal be to youre hous by cause of me,
 Or in som oother place, may wel be. (3.1219-26)

The "either/or" character of this offer seems clear from her command to choose only one and the decisiveness of "elles." Yet like the "both" of Alisoun's description of the functions of our "thynges smale" (3.121), the seeming divisiveness of "elles" proves to be more a copula than a partition as the old wyf choose for her young husband to be "both" (3.1240).

In her essay "The Subversive Discourse of the Wife of Bath," Barrie Ruth Straus suggests that the overriding system for making meaning in the Wife's text is that of masculine desire. She theorizes that the tale and the women

in it double masculine desire and thus illustrate the fallacy of the question of what women most desire since that question posits a single, unified desire in women--a typical male fantasy. Certainly, having a beautiful, young, true wife could also be understood as fulfilling male desire. Yet to conclude with Straus that all the Wife's prologue and tale do is "double the imagination and desire of masculine discourse" (549) even to subvert it is to conclude that phallogentric discourse has the power it claims. Instead, from the point of view that I have been developing, the notion of doubling itself is problematized in the Wife's way of talking.

The polyvalence embodied by the Wife's way of talking makes apparent the normalizing functions of "auctoritee" by miming them and translating them into contexts specific to her body, her desires, and her experience. Overtly Alisoun's language contains

an "other meaning" always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them. For if "she" says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything . . . (Irigaray, "This Sex which Is Not One" 29)

When Alisoun says of her fifth husband, Jankyn, that "in oure bed he was so fressh and gay, / And therwithal so wel koude he me glose, / Whan that he wolde han my bele chose"

(3.508-10), her previous use of the word "glose" in relation to body parts and functions must inflect this usage. This coupled with her use of the French euphemism for sex--*bele chose*⁶⁶--calls attention to the quality of her body that is always somewhere else, suggested but never encapsulated by the language she or others use to speak about it.

When Alisoun begins to relate her life with her fifth husband, Jankyn, as we have seen, she tells of the emotional pain he caused her by reading aloud to her out of his book of evil wives. But when Jankyn is hit in the face and thrown into the fire as he and Alisoun struggle over the book, astute readers understand that such a man has also already been inscribed by the dominant discourses of gender. Under "Adam's mark" he could not help but be. But the happy ending to Alisoun and Jankyn's story, as well as to the tale of the young knight and his newly found young love and the citational quality of the Wife's prologue, remind us that underneath the dichotomies that seem to prevail in the discourse of gender exist myriad ways of being gendered.

⁶⁶The same point might be made for her use of the euphemism *quoniam* in line 608.

CHAPTER THREE
DISPERSING FAITH:
SEINTE MARHERETE, MATERNAL BODIES,
AND TELLING STORIES

The Middle English life of Saint Margaret is found collected with the lives of Saints Katherine and Juliana and with the treatises Ancrene Riwe and Hali Meidhad in two manuscripts dating from the early thirteenth century. A martyred virgin, Margaret comes to be associated with childbirth via interpretation of a certain narrative event. While imprisoned Margaret is swallowed by a demon come to torment her in the form of a dragon. Because she has traced the sign of the cross over her body just before the demon devours her, she is saved. The dragon's abdomen bursts open so that Margaret can walk out unharmed. This part of her story connects her with medieval versions of Caesarean birth. This connection recalls both the rupturing violence of parturition--as Margaret's whole story recalls the challenge to identity implied in sexual relations--and its potential for procreativity. Margaret, therefore, is a virgin who nevertheless goes through, by displacement as it were, the pains of childbirth. Using this unique coincidence

of virginity and the suffering of childbirth, the Middle Ages constructed for Margaret a relationship with the Holy Virgin Mary, who endured none of the physical suffering or bodily rupture associated with pregnancy and childbirth yet procreated most profoundly.

In the coincidence of pain and (re)production, death and immortality, and the specular and excessively narrativized bodies, the idealization of virginity is articulated along with the redemptive capacity of childbirth. This figuration of the virgin mother was certainly one with much currency in the Middle Ages. Yet the substitutions of Margaret for Mary, of pain and ecstatic torture for a fundamentally painless embodiment, and of the saint's life narrative itself for the Christ child as the locus of potential salvation suggest the complex nature of the metaphor of holy motherhood.

Margaret's story never forgets the violence and torment associated with producing ideology, nor does it overlook its own production. Seinte Marherete, be Meiden ant Martyr is a work concerned with the business of storytelling. In the staging of its own composition, Seinte Marherete can be read as intimately concerned, both on the narrative and dramatic levels, with reproducing faithful bodies. Even within the complex of substitutions that appropriates the saint's pain to theology and turns it into a paradigm of childbirth,

Margaret does not disappear as a mother.⁷ Indeed, because her story is translated into an arena of bodily reproduction, it fails "to repress the ideological agenda of figuration" and so "unmasks the figural likenesses it seeks to create" (Margherita 60). And remaining are representatives of Margaret--"þe bodi . . . ei of þine ban . . . boc of þe pine"--"your body . . . any of your bones . . . a book of your pain" (Sainte Marherete, page 48)^{6a}--and pregnant, laboring female bodies.

Margaret's particular association with Caesarean birth and the way her story, in some revealing ways, is pulled out of the theological register into the parturitive one suggests a constant reemergence of fleshiness in the process of figuration. Her association with the Holy Virgin Mary via their similar intercessional functions during labor provides another layer of figuration in this investigation of the

^{6a}Gayle Margherita argues in her chapter "Body and Metaphor in the Middle English *Juliana*" in The Romance of Origins that "The *Juliana*, like many of the legends of virgin martyrs, can be read as a drama of origins; it represents the sacrifice of the feminine or feminized body that enables the transcendence of the logos, or, in Lacanian terms, of the paternal metaphor" (43). My reading builds upon Margherita's by focusing also on what exceeds Christianity's appropriative functions. I see Margaret's history as a benefactor of childbirth as one such site.

⁷All references to Saint Margaret's life are from Mack's edition, while my guide for translation is Millett and Wogan-Browne's selection from Medieval English Prose for Women.

status of the flesh in the formation of Christian ideology. X
 In this example of the hagiographic genre--a genre of control and hypostatization--the narrative marks itself as part of the translation of Margaret's life from virgin to identificatory mothering figure. In so doing it marks itself as a metaphor of salvation. Yet it fails to negate the difference between the body of the saint and itself as a body of intertextuality. In the prayers of every laboring mother to Saint Margaret, the in-between-ness, or the contingency, of the narrativized body is made apparent. The living on of Margaret's story of torture and death in the narrative of childbirth denies the negation of the body posited by the notion of the transcendence of the Word over the Flesh even as it seeks to demonstrate the effects of this negation. Instead it illustrates the divided quality of an ideal of transcendence dependent upon what it defines as the errancy of female physiology.

Outside of depictions of Mary's experience with pregnancy, the New Testament presents childbearing in only the most ambivalent of terms:

[W]omen should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion. Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became

a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children . . . (I Timothy, 2:9-15)

Within this passage are all the elements of medieval concepts of sexual difference. As an imperfect aftereffect of Adam's desire for company, the woman is the danger of the appareled flesh, of duplication when replication was hoped for. Instead of praying (verse 8), women should dress appropriately and let their deeds speak for them. Their profession,⁶⁹ or public declaration, of religion becomes publicly quieted, displaced to the signs their bodies carry. Clothes and deeds replace their silenced voices. The passage echoes and recuperates the curse placed on Eve in Genesis 3:16: "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; / in pain you shall bring forth children" In its attempt to inscribe a firm position for women in the new church, the Pauline verse marks not only the female's sin and its connection to flesh but also the redemptive potential of fleshly (re)production.

The passage also recalls the danger of errant language from Genesis. Throughout the Biblical revisions of the story of the fall, listening to words from the wrong source creates dangerous situations. Eve is beguiled by the words of the serpent in the garden (Genesis 3:13) and Adam is

⁶⁹"Profession" from the Latin *profiteri* meaning to declare aloud or publicly. All etymologies are from The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology.

cursed by God for having "'listened to the voice of [his] wife'" and eating from the tree "'of which I [God] commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it'" (Genesis 3:17). The serpent's subtle words are translated into the pain of childbirth and the desire that produces it for the woman, as Eve's words--which are not narrated in the text of Genesis--are translated into the constant war of toil to make the ground produce food for the man. The command of God goes unheeded and physical suffering is increased, its connections to lack and desire made explicit. The passage from I Timothy attempts to put rules in place that would prohibit situations in which the new church might hear from the wrong source, the mouth of pain and desire that is the fecund woman. Yet it is this very fecundity that the passage posits as salvational. It is with the coming of Jesus via a virgin body that salvation can be found in reproduction⁷⁹ because with this event the "treasure" of life is put into

⁷⁹In her work Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, Kristeva writes about the process of the interiorization of impurity in the New Testament. In her chapter ". . . *Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi*" Kristeva posits the notion that the interiorization of Christic flesh into the trinity parallels and illustrates a movement from a concept of the threat of evil from without--indicated by the Levitical prohibitions--toward a different speaking subject with the potential for defilement and evil always residing within. My reading grows from my understanding of Kristeva's way of thinking of the body as a medium of identity.

the "earthen vessels" of mortal bodies (II Corinthians 4:7).

Humans are

always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus's sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. (II Corinthians 4: 10-11)

In response to the positive potential now available in the flesh, Pauline theology, using a maternal metaphor, posits a recuperation of Eve's original punishment of multiplied sexual desire and the pain of childbearing that is its logical outcome. Thus, a woman can be saved through having children "if she continues in faith and love and holiness" (I Timothy 4:15). In some ways, the concept of maternity is enlarged to be descriptive of all Christians as in the second letter to the Corinthians. This appropriative attempt, however, does not negate the difference that Genesis made female physiology bear. To recall the passage from Timothy and the sentiments prevalent in the Middle Ages that it spawned, the Christian woman is both cursed and blessed with childbirth: it is a mark of Eve's sin and the curse on her at the same time that it is personally and, via Mary, racially and culturally salvific.

Bodily significations are translated into theology just as the continuation of the faith is dependent upon childbirth and its ever-present inscription of pain. Even as

fleshly activity is overwritten and made inferior, it remains a hidden intrinsic factor in reproducing faith. Therefore, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, the command in Genesis to "Be fruitful and multiply" (1:28) was an injunction to be not only spiritually prolific, but also physically so:

The precept given as to generation looks to the whole multitude of men. This multitude must be not only multiplied bodily, but advanced spiritually. Therefore, sufficient provision for the human multitude is made, if some undertake the task of carnal generation. (qtd. in Noonan 278-79; my emphasis)⁷¹

Carnal generation seems an a priori constituent in the process of spirituality even as this statement devalues the physiological. Salvation supplants but is dependent on the maternal body.

The same sublation takes place in the story of Mary. During the Middle Ages Mary's spiritually necessary body was created as an object of constant study. Questions over if and how Mary remained ever-virgin and whether she menstruated and lactated persisted as perplexing areas of disputation. Belief in such concepts as the Incarnation/Annunciation, Mary's own Immaculate Conception, her perpetual virginity, and Bodily Assumption tend to

⁷¹ Thomas makes this statement in *Summa Theologica* as part of his valorization of virginity and in so doing defines bodily procreation as spiritually inferior to the work of saving souls. Yet for Thomas, bodily multiplication remains the stage upon which spiritual multiplication takes place.

suggest that hers was no ordinary human body. Such theologies and their popular celebrations in feast days tended to erase many of the attributes that would define her as the human mother of God; that is, if given a perfect body, she was nothing more than a vessel that received and nurtured the Divine Seed, adding nothing of herself. It was a commonplace of medieval science to understand that from the female matter--the menses--the child was formed by the guiding principle of the male semen.⁷² The woman participated in this way, albeit to an inferior degree, in the final constitution of the child. However, if Mary is denied original sin, via the notion of her Immaculate Conception, she does not share the curse of Eve, and being without the spot of sin⁷³ she must also be without the monthly "spot" of menstruation. If this were held to be true, such practices and theologies that denied Mary's body its fallen physicality tended to deny Christ's humanity and the notion of salvation based upon it as well. In the concern over the purity and physicality of the *Theotokos* we can discern some of the boundaries the early Christian church set up for itself. In the contentions over the

⁷²For a sampling of useful source materials see Bullough, Jacquart and Thomasset (48-86), and Wood.

⁷³The Middle Ages read Song of Songs 4:7 as a prefiguration of Mary: "You are all fair, my love; there is no flaw [spot] in you."

precise nature of Mary's physiology, the culture's repulsion of menstruation⁷⁴ and the narrative necessity of God's absolute purity represent two opposite, hierarchically situated poles of difference. Mary's body illustrates the interdependent nature of their existence.

Given the complexities of this relationship, the belief that the Virgin lactated and suckled her child persisted and provides another perspective on her embodiment and the always doubled nature of its procreativity. From the earliest first-century images of her, Mary has been represented as a nursing mother. The Protevangelium describes a midwife witnessing the appearance of the child which then "went and took the breast of its [the child's] mother Mary." A thirteenth century lyric, "I Sing of One That Is Matchless," praises "þe suete broste þat hire sone sec" (31:22), while another lyric of the same period, "Our Lady Help Us at Our Ending," blesses "þe pappis þat godis sone sauk" (66:5). This popular tradition continued and grew in the fourteenth century. In "Marye, Mayde Mylde and Fre" the "melke of [Mary's] breste" (32:66) has the power of taming the wild unicorn, and a "Song of Love to the Blessed Virgin" reminds readers that the Christ child was dependent

⁷⁴This was an outgrowth of Levitical prohibitions (12:19-30) against uncleanness. Jacquart and Thomasset collect a series of popular beliefs about the power of the menses or a menstruating woman to taint and curse food (73-74).

on his mother's milk, which he "sek . . . of hire brest" (111:13). This common imagery recalls what is, in some ways, a normalization of Mary's body via a connection between lactation and menstruation. Incorporating ideas from Arabic medical writings, medieval doctors accepted and fostered the basic idea that milk is formed from menstrual blood.⁷⁵ In the reminder of the death curse, then, is the nourishing vitality of food. One incorporation, in Genesis, is translated into another in the menstrual blood/mother's milk continuum. Components of death and life are contingent upon one another. The cursed body of Eve,⁷⁶ although constantly reinscribed with the "Ave" of Mary, never disappears in the equation; reminders and remainders of the matter of Mary's female body, so closely tied to its salvational purposes, recur in such displays as that of Mary's *mikveh* or tub where she washed away the defilement caused by her period, still a popular part of the tour at the Church of the Annunciation

⁷⁵See Jacquart and Thomasset (43, 52 & 72) and Wood (721). Although the physiological details of this transformation were debated during the middle ages, the fundamental idea of the transformation itself was standard. Bynum simply states that "all ancient biologists thought that the mother's blood fed the child in the womb and then, transmuted into breast milk, fed the baby outside the womb" ("The Body of Christ" 100).

⁷⁶See Leviticus chapter twelve for proscriptions surrounding purifying a mother's body after birth and chapter fifteen, verses 19 through 30 for rules dealing with menstrual uncleanness.

in Nazareth (Wood 722-23). Analogously, part of Saint Margaret's torture at the hands of the pagan Olibrius is to be bound and thrown into a vessel of water, a translated purification of another ostensibly pure, enclosed woman.

The connection of the curse to procreation and salvation returns us to the passage from II Corinthians cited above. Whether it is Mary's, Jesus's, or any Christian's, the biblical body carries both life and death. This body is a permeable thing, a conglomeration of insides and outsides in which boundaries are transient and contingent. To be sure, the idea of a discrete human body, bounded firmly at all points, is certainly a prevalent one, else the tales of martyred saints like Margaret would have little force. It is through the violation of such boundaries that identification through pain and separation takes place and humans and societies define themselves.⁷⁷ Yet as the interdependent nature of the relationship between Mary, mother of God, and Eve, mother of mortality, makes evident, unbounded flesh is never far outside the frame. According to

⁷⁷This is one of Kristeva's main points in Powers of Horror. This is also Margherita's foundational theory. She connects the dispersal of Juliana's body with the dispersal of the English language under French rule: "The English language is shown to transcend the dissolution of the social and political body wherein it originates, just as the typological relation between female saint and Christ is predicated upon violent sublimation of her feminine flesh" (44).

the medieval Christian frame, upon addition of the most pure of all bodily substances--sperm⁷⁸--the unformed matter of maternal bodies is supposed to produce the paradigmatic: an able-bodied Christian man. But as a look at some medieval medical concepts will exemplify, this notion of identity formation from matter does nothing so much as displace and multiply the effects of the unformed matter. Whether one considers the texts of the life of Eve or those of Mary, the excessive potential of the flesh remains. The stories about Eve and her connection to Mary at once try and fail to translate her body into punishment and desire, while remarking the body in pain and childbirth. In their very urge to write away Mary's body--one way of doing this is by establishing her as an anti-Eve--the stories that create Mary as *Theotokos* illustrate this displacement and the desire for unity that caused it to proliferate. This desire arises in the narratological construction of Genesis I

⁷⁸Jacquart and Thomasset cite several classical and medieval sources on this position. From William of Conches' Dragmaticon Philosophiae, they quote the following "Sperm is thus the seed of the man, composed of the purest substance of all parts of the body" (54). Thomas Aquinas posits the idea that the semen receives the power of the heavenly bodies through which God exercises his power in the world (57). In his De Formatione Corporis Humani in Utero, Giles of Rome equates the ability of the sperm to form so many components out of formless matter with divine virtue and intellect (59). Additionally, as Wood points out, these views were most fully expressed by Albertus Magnus in De Animalibus (715).

traced in my chapter on the Man of Law's Tale. The narrativization of God's desire to bring humanly intelligible form to the chaos of the universe reveals a deity whose world is incomplete. However, to preserve a notion of a God of plenitude, whose Word and wisdom are eternal and immortal,⁷⁹ the narrative transfers this lack to the first human who longs not to be alone. In Genesis 3:16, desire becomes part of Eve's punishment for eating the fruit of the prohibited tree. This series of displacements highlights also a series of replacements that create truth: the narrative structure creates and thus is replaced by the truth of a transcendent God, whose desire in turn is replaced by that of the first human; this human desire is placed onto the female, and the male replaces God as the object of her desire. Such a series betokens the supplemental and differential structure of identity formation. The concern over the business of storytelling displayed by the narrator of Margaret's life similarly marks a series of placements and replacements in which contingencies defining the saint's body play a part.

Prevalent opinion in the middle ages held that even the difference between the sexes was similarly differential. Asserting most meticulously an opinion that grew to great

⁷⁹See Book XI of Augustine's Confessions.

currency in the middle ages, Galen (circa second century A.D.) postulated the interrelatedness of the sexes. As part of his reasoning about why women are less perfect than men, Galen asserts that the female reproductive system was just like the male's only turned outside in:

. . . in women the parts are within [the body], whereas in men they are outside. Consider first whichever ones you please, turn outward the woman's, turn inward, so to speak, and fold double the man's, and you will find them the same in both in every respect. (2:628)

Galen then develops in detail the exact matches between body parts, correlating scrotum with uterus, testicles "lying outside" with the ovaries, penis with vagina, and prepuce with labia. According to Galenic logic based largely on the four humors, the reason a female child is formed, that is, the reason the organs remain inside the body, is that the female is colder than the male. Due to this "defect in the heat" (2:630; my emphasis)⁸⁰ the organs could not emerge and

⁸⁰Galen, however, does not at this point tackle the question of why the female fetus that has formed the correct parts does not have the requisite heat to bring its organs to fruition. The idea is present in the earlier Hippocratic corpus of works (1: footnote 78). Later in Book XIV, Galen asserts via empirical evidence that the purest semen is produced by and the cleanest portion of the uterus lies on the right side of the body since this side is fed by arteries that do not pass through other organs before reaching their final destination (2:634-35). The middle ages tended to accept both Galen's scientific explanations and the taboos about dividing up space upon which they were based and which they supplemented (Jacquart & Thomasset 50-51).

perfect themselves. Yet Galen asserts, this lack proves beneficial to humanity:

. . . this, though making the animal itself that was being formed less perfect than one that is complete in all respects, provided no small advantage for the race; for there needs must be a female. Indeed, you ought not to think that our Creator would purposely make half the whole race imperfect and, as it were, mutilated, unless there was to be some great advantage in such a mutilation. (2:630)

While making the male body the model of humanness, such a concept of gender as produced by the presence or absence of mutilation suggests the accidental quality of bodily reproduction. Dogma, doctrine, and practice throughout the period idealized classical concepts of the superiority of the mind over the body, the soul over the flesh, and the man over the woman. Yet this Galenic undercurrent--which is a discourse concerned with marking boundaries in undifferentiated flesh--indicates such hierarchies were reversible. That is, this discourse at once tries and fails to hide the processes--theological, scientific, philosophical, semiotic--that produce its notions of that which is transcendent, natural, and perfect.

Implied in this notion of accidental gender is an underlying notion of the human body as not discretely bounded. When the prime physiological markers of gender, the genitalia, are perceived as essentially mobile, or more precisely interchangeable, and this is a movement and

exchange between what is perceived to be inside and outside, then the notion of a distinctly bounded body can be seen as discursively influenced. Such transmutableness of what is accounted as originary recalls the lack of differentiation at the base of even the most basic dichotomy, that of inside/outside or I/not-I. The belief in an exclusive body must be reconsidered in light of such medical theories and their implications of accidental gender and identity.

Medieval medical practices tended to bear out a concept of the body different from the modern post-Freudian body in which specific processes of establishing bodily boundaries are associated with identifiable family figures and moments in time. The medieval medical body both had an internal coherence and extensive, overdetermined connections to the world outside it. Astrology is one pathway by which such connections were made. Chaucer's "Doctour of Phisik" exemplifies the mixture of empiricism, planetary motion, and practice that partially constituted medieval medicine:

In al this world ne was ther noon hym lik,
 To speke of phisik and of surgerye,
 For he was grounded in astronomye.
 He kepthe his pacient a ful greet deel
 In houres by his magyk natureel.
 Wel koude he fortunen the ascendent
 Of his ymages for his pacient.

.
 He was a verray, parfit praktisour (Fragment 1. Lines
 410 - 418)

In this description and in the portrait of the Doctor as a whole, the patient appears as a name and attributes-- "ymages"--gleaned from the movements of the planets. Even the basic act of cutting open the body in surgery is based on astrological signs. Perhaps someone under the doctor's knife needs to have her body opened for medical purposes, but it was already a body influenced from outside in ways that need to be interpreted. The Man of Law puts it as follows:

For in the sterres, clerer than is glas,
Is writen, God woot, whoso koude it rede,
The deeth of every [one], withouten drede. (2.194-96)

Medieval medical writings are full of attempts at learning to read this so-called writing. The practice of etymological investigation marked much medical knowledge of the Middle Ages. As medieval etymology was largely a quest for the essential truth of any signifier, its purpose for being what it is, so medieval physiological research focused on the purpose of any organ, the way it received, held, and passed on the spirits that animated it. From this perspective, organs become the physical manifestations of what are perceived of as essential *pneuma* that provide a human with intellect and connections to divinity (Jacquart & Thomasset 7-47). Organs, which may be perfect or not, situate each expression of the essential in this way.

The influence of heavenly bodies on human ones remained a complex area of medical debate in the Middle Ages. From Augustine, Bonaventure, and Albertus Magnus to Thomas Aquinas and Vincent of Beauvais, medical thinkers proposed various and often contradictory theories concerning the active potential of the zodiac and the heavens to influence human lives and reproduction of them (Jacquart & Thomasset 56-7). One way this influence was figured was through the metaphor of the microcosm/macrocosm. This perspective situated the body as a representative in miniature of the universe, in tune with all its rhythms and influences. During the Middle Ages Pythagorean theories of the four humors were elaborated with Arabic notions of planetary influence over specific parts and functions of the human body. Tristram includes a picture of zodiac man from an early fourteenth century English manuscript (plate 6)⁸¹ illustrating the various connections between signs of the zodiac and specific parts of the body. From Aries the Ram's government of the head to Scorpio's association with the groin to Pisces' charge of the feet, the system was a complete one.⁸² Additionally, each of the four humors and

⁸¹See also Gilman, plate 45.

⁸²Pouchelle cites a surgeon, Bertapaglia, from the second half of the fourteenth century as the first to develop these planetary correspondences in detail (231, footnote 42).

its corresponding disposition was associated with a planet: phlegmatic with Venus, sanguine with Jupiter, choleric with Mars, and melancholic with Saturn. Beyond this, however, as Constantinus Africanus writes in his treatise on coition, "God can grant" what he will (trans. in Delany 59).

Chaucer's Alisoun of Bath justifies her appetites and conduct by claiming such affinities with the planets:

I hadde the prente of seinte Venus seel.

 For certes, I am al Venerien
 In feelynge, and myn herte is Marcien.
 Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,
 And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse (3.604 & 690-12)

This passage exemplifies the way different discourses intersected to produce perceptions of a human body even in popular contexts. A physiological aspect of the body--the birthmark or "Venus seel"--is translated into the astrological register, which is itself a way of talking about the Wife's "likorous" social behavior. Yet the birthmark is not the cause for Alisoun's behavior; it is a mark of previous planetary influence, the "vertu of [her] constellacioun" (3.616). In this complex of displacements and replacements we can discern a cause/effect but one in which the apparently original astrological cause has been transferred into the effect of social behavior as its simultaneous explanation and signifier via the interpreted mark on the body. Like the surgeon who would not dare make

an incision in a body when the moon was waxing for fear he might not be able to stop the bleeding, Alisoun of Bath uses her knowledge of planetary influences to explain her socially active body.

From such an example we can see the medieval perception of the overdetermined functions of the human body: "natural" causes of disease were not necessarily physiological causes. In fact, medieval etiology was just as often concerned with astrology, divine influence, social behavior, and the way diseases were named and taxonomized as with examination of urine, pustules, or body parts. The social and sexual, procreative body was one term in the series. In many ways, this series of philosophy, etymology, science, and theology attempted to subsume and thus control the body by explaining and delimiting it. But the very complex and often contradictory nature of medical discourse, this "magyk natureel," illustrates a continuing confusion over and mystification of human physiology. Aristotelian binary logic and the Galenic science founded on it may have described a dual existence, divided into spirit and body, male and female, but this is a logic which undoes itself as it differentiates and figures its terms. In the same way, medieval science progressed in its capability to describe human physiology but continued to mystify physiology.

Even physical descriptions of human bodies illustrate the way in which the biological sciences⁸³ created their object of study. In Northern Italy there is evidence that dissections on human bodies were carried out as early as the end of thirteenth century, though it was not until the late fourteenth century that dissections were officially sanctioned in France. It was not until 1478 that the first human body was dissected in Paris (Pouchelle 25; Jacquart & Thomasset 35). Many medieval physiological descriptions were thus based on dissections of animals, particularly sows, in relation to the study of the female reproductive organs. Also involved was the teleological paradigm which emphasized the mechanism of any organ over its exact physical properties. However, even with the regularization of human dissections, the process was highly ritualized and was carried out for the purposes of demonstrating the learning passed on from the ancients (Pouchelle 84).

One way in which such knowledge was passed on was via medical practice. A typical example of a vernacular medical text is the English Trotula or the fourteenth-century redaction of the *De passionibus mulierum curandarum*. The historical Trotula may have been an eleventh-century student

⁸³This phrase should be adequately problematized and enlarged by this point in the paper to include this complex of beliefs, philosophies, and refractions that created the paradigm of medieval medicine.

from the medical school at Salerno or the name may be a play on the word "trot." Like *La Vielle* in *Le Roman de la Rose*, the trot was an old woman who still associated herself with sexual pleasures by instructing younger women in everything from proper table manners to cosmetics, from how to catch a man to how to abort a child. Perhaps it is impossible to authenticate the existence of a person named Trotula.

However, that women did practice medicine and were associated with the great medical schools at least from the eleventh century to the fourteenth both on the continent and in England is supported by government and school records (Rowland, ed. 3-12). Despite the uncertainty of its origins and author, the English Trotula serves as one way of investigating how the opinions of the learned doctors were translated into vernacular common practice. As exemplary of medical manuals for women, the English Trotula reifies Aristotelian notions of the female as an inferior being, by nature susceptible to more disease than the male. As such she has special medical needs appropriate only for other women to investigate and treat. English Trotula suggests

For as moche as there ben manye women that hauen many diuers maladies and sekenesses nygh to þe deth and thei also ben shamefull to schewen and to tellen her greuaunces unto eny wyght, therefore I schal sumdele wright to herre maladies remedye, praying to God ful of grace to sende me grace truly to write to þe plesaunce of God & to all womannes helpyng. . . . And thowgh women have diuers evelles & many greet greuaunces mo

than all men knowen of, as I seyde, hem schamen
 And yf women be in dissesse, suche men haue hem in
 despyte & thenke nought how moche dysese women haue or
 þan they haue brought hem into þis world. And
 therefore, in helping of women I wyl wright of women
 þreue sekenes the helpyng, and that oon woman may helpe
 another in her sykeness & nought diskuren her þreuees
 to suche vncurteys men. (page 58)⁸⁴

Buried in this justification are the Aristotelian notion of the accidental and thus inferior quality of female physiology and its scientific and Christian emendations which tend to recuperate this "naturally fallen"⁸⁵ state. This statement serves as a preface for a work that repeats this discourse of secrets and shame⁸⁶ but at the same time describes the female body in overt terms.⁸⁷ In this text,

⁸⁴All references to the English Trotula are to Rowland's edition.

⁸⁵Responding to a query concerning whether or not menstruating women should be allowed to attend church, Pope Gregory the Great (540?-604) compared "this natural overflowing" to any suffering humans undergo because of the body, like hunger, thirst, and fatigue. While he calls menstruation "an infirmity," it is a result of post-lapsarian depravity of the body to which all humans are subject in some degree or kind, a specific divine judgment that signifies God's justice and love (qtd. in Wood 713-14). Similarly our author claims that "on man shuld dispise oþer for þe disese þat God sendith hym but to haue compassion of hym and releuen hym yef he myght" (58).

⁸⁶See for instance page 164: "Divers tymes it happith of diuers women a mischeuous greuance in trauaillinge of chyld for defaute of good mydwifes, and that greuance kepen priue & it nedith for to be holpen." Also, the term "þreue membre" used throughout (e.g. pages 92 and 100) refers to the secrecy of these body parts.

⁸⁷Rowland suggests that the popularity of Trotula texts may have been due to their "pornographic" character (3). Gravdal

ostensibly one that protects the modesty of women, procedures are described that put body parts on display and which again indicate the transient boundaries of the female body. From suppositories inserted into the "prevy membres" but "bounde with a threde abouten oon of her thyes" lest they be drawn completely inside (68), to instructions to midwives about how to insert her hands, anointed with certain oils, to correct the position of a fetus during childbirth (122-55); from the prescriptions for fumigations held near the nostrils and/or vaginal opening to ensure the correct position of the uterus (92, 100, & 102) to descriptions of and cures for prolapse of the uterus (98-105), like any medical text this one attempts to make the secrets of the body known.

Similarly the Holy Virgin Mary "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19) while her body revealed her secrets. The Protevangelium says that after the Annunciation "Mary was afraid . . . and hid herself from the children of Israel . . . when these mysteries came to pass" (12:3). Yet her physiological state reveals her secrets to Joseph when he first sees her. His shame is so great upon seeing her pregnant that he begins to mourn and weep. He

suggests that female saints' lives tales were a place where religion could look guiltlessly on the female body. In the Trotula works, science is the justification for the prurient gaze.

claims that in him the story of Adam is repeated (13:1-2). In the N-Town and York Cycle dramas, a similar displacement of the state of Mary's body onto Joseph occurs. The shame and responsibility become Joseph's. In the N-Town, he fears being known as an "Olde cockwold" and threatens to return Mary "To þe busshop . . . / Ðat he þe lawe may here do / With stonys . . ." what is appropriate ("Joseph's Doubt," lines 55 & 95-97). The York cycle's "Joseph's Trouble about Mary" begins with the elderly Joseph's complaints about having to take a young wife. The fears of being shamed behind these complaints come true upon his view of his pregnant wife whose "sidis shewes she is with childe" (line 102). Again, the text illustrates how Mary's obviously pregnant body signifies what is at stake for Joseph. He fears now that he will "dare loke no man in þe face" (147) and that he will have to "bere þe blame" (181) of her pregnancy. He tells her

But Marie, all þat sese þe
may witte þi werkis ere wan,
Thy wombe all way it wreyes þe,
þat þou has mette with man. (163-66)

The look on the pregnant body creates shame as it brings to bear on the body a series of cultural and religious constructs that proscribe behaviors and the bodies such behaviors produce. Mary's pregnant body betrays or publishes--"wreyes"--an act but it also reveals the limits

built into such patterned behaviors. The York cycle spends 236 lines on Joseph's confusion over Mary's pregnancy while the N-Town spends 125 lines and the whole of the play "The Trail of Joseph and Mary"⁸⁸ on failed attempts to bring Mary's pregnancy within discursive areas that will make it sensible, that is, that will make the physical experience of it comprehensible intellectually. In other words, Joseph's and the priests' constant reiteration of the question, "Whose is the child?", illustrates the limits of a community's ability to make Mary's words of innocence and virginity match what seems to be her body's obvious breached state. Only with the overlay of Christian faith does her body become intelligible to the characters in these stories. Similarly, Margaret's torture only makes others, particularly Olibrius, uncomfortable. Before Olibrius first tortures her, Margaret prays that it might not appear that she suffers any pain (page 15) and the narrative never shows her suffering or doubting at all. However, the text constantly describes the agitation Margaret's torture brings to Olibrius.⁸⁹ While such an overlay again tends to appropriate maternity and annul its physicality, Mary's intimate connection to Eve and the emphasis on her bodily

⁸⁸This portion of the cycle is based loosely on Protevangelium, chapters fifteen and sixteen.

⁸⁹See pages 11, 17, 19 and 45 for examples.

existence that the period developed suggest that one intractable term underlying all the discourses that articulate medieval Christianity is the risky potential of flesh.

Similarly, mixed in with the prognoses, diagnoses, and treatments in all their measurements, ingredients, and instruments of the English Trotula are statements that reveal the cultural syntheses that have developed this paradigm of science and the body it investigates. In addition to the statements throughout that leave medical matters to the grace of God, the English Trotula situates its expertise within a specific moral and legal framework. In suggesting what to do for a woman whose uterus has traveled so far as to press against her heart and lungs and suffocate her, the text claims that one remedy is

to haue company with man. But þus vnderstonde: in lawefull companying, as with her housebandes and with none other; for in certayn it were better for a man other for a woman to haue þe grettest sekenesse of þe body the whiles þei leven than to ben helyd thorough a dede of lechery other any other dede ayenst goddis hestys. (90)

This statement of propriety simply marks in the text another form of cure. It is preceded by a detailed description of the physiology that causes the disease and of the extent of the pain in which it puts a woman; it precedes several rigorously described recipes and techniques for replacing the uterus in its appropriate location. The text accepts

what is "lawefull" as another part of medicine that unquestionably falls within and helps define the scientific purview. Just as the text begins with a buried reminder of the curse of Eve, it accepts and creates as part of its province the morals and laws that make Christianity intelligible. In this way it also reveals one way that the female body has been made intelligible--as an identifying point of a society's understanding of itself as proper, lawful, and unified. But at the same time it recalls the risky, secret, or "prevy" (page 58) aspects of flesh connected most specifically with women via Eve. In this complex we begin to see how the unknown and the uncontrollable are also identifying points, even as the most standard of texts--like the English Trotula or Genesis--attempt to displace such dissemination in order to reify the society's belief in its eternal verity, its transcendent nature. The dangers of the unknown become the perilous secrets of a sex only to be turned into shame upon which a system of laws and moral behavior rests as if a natural response to a naturally faulty physiology and the intellectual capacity it produces.

In these processes we can see the several discourses that created the empiricism of medieval medicine and the teleological, etymological, mechanistic medical body. Within this spectrum, a body could signify many things--Galen's

teachings, planetary movements, a blessing from God, an etymological chain. Knowledge of the human body was constantly being created and appropriated even as the scientific community considered itself to be moving ever closer to the truth of the body. Such processes could make the body signify variously. This is one way that saints' lives tales worked: they put the narrated body in pain, which pain comes to signify Christian faith and salvational history.⁹⁰ In The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World, Elaine Scarry argues that because pain of itself resists language seeming to refer to nothing but itself, it is most often figured by objects that inflict it. In her investigation of various modern transcripts of sessions of torture for political reasons, she discovers that such objectifications have allowed pain to be appropriated by those wishing to consolidate their power. In such an appropriation, bodily pain is figured as the ability to inflict said pain. So the body in pain becomes a medium for those, like Olibrius, who gain power by creating the spectacle of pain.

Yet the empirical process was, as the English Trotula evidences, an empiricism that is also a morality, a

⁹⁰Margherita suggests that saints' lives may also serve to consolidate nationalistic and linguistic projects via such appropriation.

cosmology, a legal system, and a theology. Such a process reveals the anxiety over the lack of control, the inability to name and define once and for all, certain foundational elements of cultural identity--here physiology, particularly the workings of the female body. Even though such a desire for identity operates by excluding, delimiting, and negating differences, and such appropriative forces can have potent effects, vestiges of difference appear as both the potential of predication and the risk of dissemination.

Seinte Marherete is a typical text in that it attempts to appropriate the pain of the saint as a way to (re)produce English Christianity and its transcendent values. In many ways it reflects a unified culture predicated on controlling and translating differences, like women's bodies, desires of Asian princes, and even heresies of black demons from hell (Seinte Marherete 25). Yet it also narratively and historically illustrates how the pain of mothering resurfaces in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways. As typical of the hagiographic genre and with its own particular history of reception, Seinte Marherete illustrates the efficacy of repetition in reinscribing culture at the same time its repetition marks its intertextuality and the threat that iterability suggests to dominant tropes of culture. As our view of the English Trotula has illustrated, the reproductive, female body is

one among many textualized tropes that at once are the reflections of this culture's belief in transcendent values and are the excessive reminders of how such precepts were created as transcendent.

Seinte Marherete begins by outlining part of the complex process that produces Christian faith and those who hold it. As in The Man of Law's Tale, Christianity is highlighted against that which it is not: Christians do not worship "heðene mawmez, of stockes ant of stanes werkes iwrahte"--"heathen idols, wretched things made of sticks and stones." Instead Christians worship Jesus who deigned to live for a time "bimong eordliche men"--"among earthly men" and who "botnede blinde, þe dumbe, te deaue, ant to deade arerde to lif ant to leomen"--"cured the blind, the dumb, the deaf and raised the dead to life and light." The faithful are those who "beoð of Crist icleopet, swa 3ef ha nutteð hare nome"--"are named by Christ, such that they deserve [or "profit by"] their name." This they do by "deð dreheð for [Christ], oðer eni nowcin"--"suffering death for Christ or any hardship" (page 2). In this brief setting of tone for the piece, we see the constitutive position of bodily existence in the realm of salvation. The propriety and prosperity of the name of God is made manifest via the mutability of bodies. In this generically standard passage,

the intersection between the ongoing discourse of "godes lay" (2) or "God's law" and its individual iterations--here marked not only by the story of Margaret but also by the singular narrator, Teochimus, who names himself even before naming Margaret--makes clear the doubled structure of Christian faith. This introduction to a story of torture and faith reflects the Neoplatonic disdain for the flesh in its censure of the "licomes lustes" (2) or "lusts of the body" and translates fleshly suffering and sensuality into the realm of proof of God's existence and grace. In other words, the passage exemplifies standard Christian doctrine about the inferior place of the body in salvation. Yet the passage also highlights that the articulations of this salvific system as the only manifestations of salvation are its bodily ones.

As a whole Seinte Marherete repeats this disdain for the flesh even as it is through the saint's body that she proves her faith in God and that divine grace is made perceptible. Margaret can easily, with no hint of contradiction, at once ask for protection from "fleschliche fulðen" or "fleshly defilement" (9) and emphasize the physicality of her spirituality. She says of her relationship with Jesus that she has given to him her "meiðhad i3ettet, & luuie as leouemon & leue as on lauerd"--

"virginity intact and love[s] [him] as a lover and believe[s] as on a lord" (9).⁹¹ The impact of physiology is made apparent in this example which is one of many in the text.⁹² Margaret makes clear the significance of sensuality as part of the godhead when she instructs her tormentor, Olibrius, about the Christian God. She tells this Asian prefect that what makes Jesus effectual is his physiology in opposition to the pagan deities, which are "witlese wihtes . . . , blodles ant banles, dumbe & deaue"--"senseless beings . . . , bloodless and boneless, dumb and deaf" (43). Here we see the ambiguity of the salvific Christic body. As the fundamental paradox of Christianity, Jesus "is soð mon & godd"--"is true man and God" (43). Salvational efficacy arises only from this unique yet repeatedly prophesied and retold intersection. The Christic body is just as dependent upon the flesh as on the divine in effecting its salvific purpose.

As we have seen, however, from Genesis onward, this dependency is displaced onto the idea of the secondary, risky material of the feminine and maternal body. The positive inversion of this risk, then, is the control over

⁹¹Such imagery was common in mystical writings of the period. Women mystics especially highlighted a romantic or erotic union with Jesus. For recent studies of this trope see Wiethaus.

⁹²See for other examples pages 3, 5, 11, and 13.

that body, a desire for control exemplified in the female saints' lives genre by the emphasis on virginity as the path to God. Margaret puts it as follows: "Mi lauerd haueð mine limen sunderlich iseilet, & haueð, to me 3imstan þat ich 3ettede him, i3arket ant i3eve me kempne crune"--"My lord has especially sealed my limbs and, for the gem-stone that I granted him, has prepared and given me a champion's crown" (43). This is one of several times that Margaret makes claims to have a sealed, crystallized body. At the beginning of the tale as she sees the threat Olibrius brings to her, she prays to the lord to protect her "deor 3imstan . . . mi meiðhad ich meane"---"precious jewel . . . my virginity, I mean" (7). Again as Olibrius presses her to worship his idols, she claims that Jesus "haueð iseilet to him [her] seolf & [her] meiðhad"---"has sealed [her]self and [her] virginity to him" (11). After Olibrius threatens her with physical torture, Margaret defines her special relation with Christ: "He haueð his merke on me iseilet wið his in-seil, ne mei unc nowðer lif ne deað tweamin atwa"---"He has his mark on me, sealed me with his seal, nor may death or life divide us again" (13). This apparently closed crystalline body, however, becomes the doorway for others to enter heaven. After being thrown bound into a cauldron of water to drown and being saved by her own prayer, the suffering Margaret converts "fif þusent men"---"five thousand men"

(45). All these converts are immediately put to death by the prefect, and they ascend to heaven praising God. In this translation of the ritualized cleansing--the Levitical proscription of the *mikveh* in which even Mary participated--the cursed body of Eve seems almost absent. As we have seen, the text leaves no doubt about the state of Margaret's body; she will not heed the words of the devil or of the "feondes an foster"--"the devil's own child" (7)--Olibrius, and thus is safe from the errancy of spirit and body to which Eve damned women. But as one demon who visits the saint in her cell points out, Margaret is "ne nawhit . . . wommon ilich"--"in no way like [other] women" (31). In many ways she seems the perfect virgin who feels no pain or desire except for her lord; she is, in some ways it seems, even purer than the Holy Virgin.

As such a marker and animator of faith, Margaret supplements the Christic body with which the text started and which she invokes throughout as she crosses herself. Yet within this complex of various bodies and significations slipping one into the next we will see how Margaret's body reminds us that it is not the singular example of crystalline, timeless perfection the text desires it to be. Instead, as we will see, the seal on Margaret's body, which is to be emulated and imitated--as the Hali Meïḥad or

Letter on Virginity instructs us--is the very thing that divides her body and corrupts the absolute purity of the text.

One way that we can begin to see the divisions of the text is in the anxiety of the narrator to establish his authority. Teochimus, the narrator who is "ilearet in godes lay"--"learned in God's law" and who has "ired ant araht moni mislich leaf"--"read and interpreted many various pages" (3), ascribes to himself and maintains authority by the tale's repeated emphasis on virginity--which is a signifier in Christianity for purity of body and thus spirit. As we have seen, the emphasis on virginity is one way to maintain the opposition between text and body as such purity of body is seen as a way that the uncontrollable, endlessly iterable matter of female flesh is imprinted with the eternal form of divinity's seal. But this statement begins to make clear the series of substitutions and supplementations that define the idea of transcendence and its extrapolations. The contingency of the salvific Christic body is displaced onto the figure of the Holy Virgin Mary, whose physiological body remained a topic of disputation in the Middle Ages and even until 1854 when the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was declared official (Warner 52 & 236). Anxiety over the vagrancy of flesh and physiology remains in a recuperated fashion in the many metaphors of

translation, conversion, covenant, mediation, and mothering, among others, that surround Mary.⁹³ From the perspective I have been developing, all these processes reflect, specifically through the Eve/Mary binary, sites of translation and transubstantiation.

From this vantage we begin to see how female matter is made to function as a site where one realm of knowledge is transformed into another, authorized and yet jeopardized by this very transformation. In such a complex of substitution, reanimation, and authentication, the effects of world-building and of the ascription and maintenance of authority are potent. Yet each metaphor and each proscription work doubly. Each at once produces and reflects transcendent ideas of unity and control, negates difference, and thus materializes Christian ethics. But at the same time each also recalls the desire for transcendence, unity, control, and unquestionable ethical norms. Or in other words, this desire and its concomitant ever-on-going discourse point to the endlessly disseminated concepts of the Christian truth. In so doing, each recuperation recalls the vagrancy of

⁹³Some of these include Mary as Ark of the Covenant, new Eve, that which can hold what the world cannot (1 Kings 8:27), burning bush (Exodus 3:1-4), enclosed garden (Song of Songs 4:12), Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:12), gate of heaven, indestructible wall (Song of Songs 8:10), intercessor between humanity and God, new mother of humanity (as versus Eve; cf. Genesis 3:20), reliquary that holds the host. For further examples see Attwater and Hirn.

female flesh at the same time each recalls the various displacements and substitutions that intersected to form such a vagrantly useful institution.

In such a cultural complex it is not very surprising, then, that a virgin is figured as the mother of God. Nor should it surprise us that the suffering of a virgin martyr becomes a type for Caesarean birth even as she prays for laboring mothers. To be sure what first connects Margaret's story with childbirth and labor is not apparent. The Golden Legend says that while the saint prayed before her beheading, she added "a prayer that any woman who invoked her aid when faced with a difficult labor would give birth to a healthy child" (1:370). The Middle English life expands on this prayer and puts the words into a direct quotation addressed to the Lord:

I þe hus þere wummon pineð o childe, sone so heo munnið
mi nome, hihentliche help hire ant iher hire bene; þat
i þe hus ne beo iboren nan misbilimet bern, nowðer halt
ne houeret, noðer dumbe ne deaf ne ideruet of deoulen .
. . . (47 & 49)

[In the house where a woman pains with child, as soon as she remembers my name, quickly help her and obey her prayer; that in that house is born no deformed child, neither lame nor hunch-backed, neither dumb nor deaf nor plagued by the devil . . .]

But as we have seen, Margaret herself has stayed virginally intact; why does she consider herself, and why was she considered in the period, especially capable of intervening in childbirth? The answer to this question lies in the

complex of displacements surrounding one of Margaret's tests while in prison--her defeat of a demon in the form of a dragon.

The dragon scene begins with Margaret in her cell praying for, among other things, the chance to see and challenge the devil face-to-face. Soon enough her prayer is granted, even though she is so frightened that she "for3et hier bone þat heo ibeden hefde swa þat ha moste iseon þen unsehen unwiht"--"forgot her request that she had prayed that she might see the unseen devil" (23). The dragon that appears to fulfill her request is hairy with a long beard and flames flickering from his mouth. His tongue is so long that he can fling it around his shoulders when it protrudes. He advances on Margaret, arching over her and widening his mouth to swallow her whole. She prays to God to save her; then she "droh þa endelong hire, ant þwertouer þrefter, þe derewurðe taken of þe deore rode þat he on reste"--"drew on herself along downward, and across thereafter, the beloved token of that precious cross on which He rested" (25). The dragon nevertheless uses his tongue to flick her into his mouth, and then he "for-swalh into his wide wombe"--

"completely swallows [her] into his wide belly" (25). But

þe rode taken arudde hir readliche, þat heo wes mid iwepnet, ant warð his bone sone, swa þat his bodi to-barst omidheppes; & te edie meiden allunge unmerret, wið-uten euereuch weom, wende ut of his wombe, heriende on heh hire hehe healent in heouene. (25)

[the sign of the cross with which she was armed delivered her quickly, and straightway became (the dragon's) slayer, in such a way that his body burst asunder through the middle; and the blessed maiden completely unharmed, without any spot, walked out of his belly, praising her exalted savior on high in heaven.]

This scene functions in two different but complexly related ways. One thing the presence and actions of the dragon do is to distinguish Margaret's story in a specifically sexual way. The Antichrist was often represented as a dragon and imagined as a lascivious seducer. Additionally, a prominent belief in the period held that dragons or vipers give birth through deadly force: the young bit their way through the mother's belly to emerge. Also, as Rabanus Maurus explains, the procreation of viper young causes additionally the death of the father: while the female dies during birth, the male is killed by the female during intercourse. She is so frenzied during coition that she bites off the male's head (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 10 & 162, footnote 4). Such a negative allusion to sexuality in a saint's life, of course, is not unexpected, but the image of Margaret's birth from the serpent provides a unique mapping both of theological appropriations and repudiations and of how that theology endlessly generates itself, predicating accidentally its own errors even as it reifies itself most successfully.

Margaret's violent, rupturing rebirth from the dragon's "wombe" suggests the violence and double nature of Caesarean birth in the Middle ages. Vaginal birth could also be a violent and dangerous time, as evidenced by the pages and pages of the English Trotula focused solely on this one topic. In fact, Margaret Miles theorizes that the idealization of female virginity in the fourteenth century may have been one realization of typical the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth (Miles 89 & 93). Caesarean birth marked a particularly acute occurrence of this dangerous time. Caesarean birth was an act of desperation that most often cost the mother's life and after which the motherless child might survive long enough only to be baptized. In fact, midwives were constrained by the church to perform the procedure if they thought a fetus might be alive after its mother's death so that the child might be baptized and saved. Midwives were charged in such life-and-death situations with making decisions that could influence the child's ultimate potential for salvation. If they delivered a child surgically that died before it could be baptized, then that child could not be buried in consecrated ground. If they decided not to deliver a child surgically, they might be charged with murder of the child and held ethically responsible for its unbaptized state. As with other medical practices, several different and often contradictory

semiotic practices converged around the Caesarean procedure, defining, inscribing, and delimiting it. In this complex, the Caesarean procedure, more so than a vaginal delivery, marked the translational character of the maternal body. On one side were the urges, pains, and drives of physiology while on the other side were the constraints of theology, medical practice, and law (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 91-119). The Caesarean procedure could foist upon its viewers and patients some unlikely and thought-provoking images. It might provide the picture of a complete life being pulled from death. It might be a procedure which opened one body to remove another body from it then rejuvenated the maternal body--for sometimes the mothers did survive (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 7-47). The necessity of having to perform the procedure itself could be a reminder of the uncontrollable principle of female flesh even as proscriptions against sacrificing the mother for the sake of the child reified the idea of discrete personalities and subjectivities.⁹⁴ In such extrapolations, the boundaries between life and death, the self and the other, indeed the very boundaries that established personal and cultural identity could be seen as

⁹⁴Blumenfeld-Kosinski cites Thomas Aquinas's reading of Romans 3:8 on this point: "Evil should not be done so that good may come" (27) The English Trotula is also quite clear on this point: "For whan the woman is feble & þe chyld may no3t comyn out, than it is better that þe chyld be slayne than the moder of þe child also dye" (96).

contingencies and contiguities. The highly proscribed, increasingly complex offices surrounding the physiology of the Caesarean procedure⁹⁵--efforts at control--point to the foundational anxiety over any potential excess implied in female procreative activity. A woman undergoing a Caesarean procedure was as much created and delimited by the various semiotic practices of that procedure as she was a reminder, in her pain and suffering as well as in her life-giving potential, of the ways such discourses can never get at the truth of the maternal body. They only keep producing different endlessly disseminated concepts of it. In their so doing, then, we can also see how, in each call on the Virgin Mary or on Saint Margaret of a laboring mother in pain and fear, notions of identity are differential even as they reify dominant negating, specifying discourses.

The reminder of the liminality of Caesarean birth is matched by certain visual representations of the Virgin Mary as container of the whole of salvational history. The Virgin

⁹⁵Blumenfeld-Kosinski posits four factors, each with their own numerous components, as the main ones responsible for the increasing practice of Caesarean birth: "the laicization of surgery; the increasingly explicit directions for Caesareans issued by various church councils; the new definitions of areas of professional competency regarding physicians and surgeons; . . . the performance of autopsies and dissections, which started in the thirteen century" (24). In this increasingly complex system, we can discern how different institutions gained and/or struggled to maintain authority over areas material, bodily, and spiritual they considered within their purview.

was often thought of as the new Ark of the Covenant, the *sedes sapientiae* (seat of wisdom), and, from 1 Kings 8:27, the *receptaculum capacissimum*, or the most spacious of all enclosures.⁹⁶ She was the vessel, clothing, and tabernacle of Christ, the matter of his manifestation and, thus, intrinsic to his salvational functions, even as the corpus of Christian history was meant to subsume the flesh's functions to spiritual ones. One way such a concept was visualized was in the *vierges ouvranter*; these were statues of the Virgin and child that opened to show any of several things: Jesus enthroned, the trinity, or depictions of salvational history which culminate in the Incarnation.⁹⁷ The visual parallels between such an object of devotion and the procedure of Caesarean birth are striking. Both are broachings of material bodies in which life--human, both mortal and eternal--is predicated. Yet as a comparison of the *Vierges ouvranter* motif--a representation of standard theology--and Caesarean birth indicates, the maternal body is a powerful signifier in cultural definition. It is at once two things by which an entire system of values--

⁹⁶See Hirn's "The Symbols of the Virgin." The text of 1 Kings 8:27 is "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!" The text refers to the building of Solomon's temple.

⁹⁷See Bynum, "The Female Body," page 101 and figure 6.11.

ethical, moral, theological, political--operates. It is that which is inferior and mutable, a reminder of Eve's original mothering of mortality, and it, thus, is the other term that divides humanity from the unity posited in Genesis or any history of origins. As such a reminder, it is also at the same time a reminder of the predication of such a unified story and history. The idea of Mary as the container of God and the complex of discourses and practices that surrounded medieval Caesarean birth breach boundaries of maternal bodies in order to delimit and reinscribe such bounded bodies. At the same time such imaginative, theological, medical, and legal conceptions belie the "naturalness" or truth of the bodies to which they claim to refer transparently. As we have seen with the Pauline and Mariological recuperations of the original Biblical curse on Eve, with the complex of discourses and secrets that surround medical practice on women's bodies, and specifically with the web of differences that create Caesarean birth as a surgical practice, discourses instigate certain attributes of physiology which then come to be understood as attributes of specific bodies. In so doing, powerful and authoritative notions of natural and proper characteristics are institutionalized. Maternal physiology and its representations highlight both the controlling

consequences of these practices and their articulations. In each representation, in each struggle to understand or get at the truth, we can see both how the ways a society talks and writes about something create the truth of what that thing is and how that thing simultaneously and endlessly escapes this controlling desire.

In Margaret's story, however, we see no doubts over cultural or spiritual identity that her story's relation to Caesarean birth might indicate. Margaret emerges from the dragon unharmed. Her Caesarean birth is a completely successful one. Her identity has been so firmly founded in this narrative and meta-narrative rebirth that she is not even threatened by the next demon that appears. She defeats him with ease and gets him to reveal all his secrets to her while holding her heel on his throat. By stepping on this demon and controlling him Margaret recuperates the curse of enmity God put on the serpent and Eve in Genesis 3:14-15, an enmity repeated in Revelations 12 between the pregnant woman "clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (verse 1) and the "great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns" (3). This woman was a type of Mary--as Queen of Heaven"--and served as

"Mary standing on the dragon is an image still popular today. Being in physical contact with the demon seems to be Mary's purview, as even Jesus and Saint George use a weapon to injure him.

another figuration of her righting the name of Eve. Like Mary, Margaret is a virgin who experiences childbirth. Like Mary, Margaret is blessed among women (Luke 1: 41 & Seinte Marharete page 49). Like Mary, Margaret's faith and actions are unique but meant to produce endless if different repetitions, the purpose of hagiography being to teach ideal behavior. Like Mary, who is the *specula sine macula* and who in some important ways seems to have sloughed off the curse of childbirth levied against Eve, Margaret, "wið-uten euereuch weom"--"without any spot," emerges reborn from the discarded maternal body of the dragon, signifying her having left behind the (stereo)typical painful, desiring, transient female body. Margaret's body becomes the sealed, crystalline, and transparently intelligible body deployed by English Christianity to reify its system of values and enable its system of transcendence.

Yet as the series of displacements, replacements, and substitutions within this sacrificial and appropriative system indicate, the very foundational place of such ultimately uncontrollable and endlessly disseminated components as the procreative body unmasks the ideological agenda of categorization, particularly strategies of forming identity by separation and bounding. As we have seen, theological thinking, medical practice and writing, and

hagiography indicate the presence of variously bounded bodies, identified via various, often contradictory semiotic practices, concomitant with and, indeed, constitutive of dominant discourses. From this perspective we will return to the scene of Margaret's issuance from the dragon and the second way in which the scene functions. As my previous reading of the scene's sexual implications suggests and as a closer look at the narrative strategies of the scene will suggest, even this most standard employment of the sign of the cross exposes the narrative frame that is part of what makes such signifiers signify. To start, the scene is a series of displacements and substitutions, starting with Margaret's body on which she traces the cross. The text reminds us that this is the cross on which Jesus was raised. The dragon swallows her, but the cross on her body saves her and makes the dragon's body burst open so that her body can emerge unharmed. For her delivery, she praises her savior in heaven aloud--that is, sensually. The scene makes the interdependence and materiality of these signifiers apparent. They signify as a series instigated at the tale's beginning and reinscribed and reinvested throughout by Teochimus's claim to authority, itself reinvested via his storytelling.⁴⁴ This is an authority that works by negating

⁴⁴Margaret also participates in this anxious desire for maintaining authority by telling stories. After she defeats

difference and desiring unity, as we have seen in the tale's reification of the mind/body dichotomy and its production of Margaret's "sealed" body. Yet the very act of authoring in this tale is an act of making the truth material. The truth of Teochimus's faith and of "godes lay" (3) lies ultimately in not only the suffering, sealed body of Margaret but also in the sloughed off reproductive flesh of the dragon, that dangerous, supplemental formless matter, which the narrator's text(s) can carry but not hold onto completely. In some important ways, then, the dragon scene reminds us of the intertextuality of the hagiographic undertaking. The virginal, maternal body has been weighted by medical practice and writing, Mariology and its connections to Eve, damnation, and salvation, propriety, diffusion, and dissemination. Margaret reinscribes the context her narrator ascribes to her at the same time that the reliance on her physicality and its many connections undermines the transcendence of the narrator's beliefs and of Margaret's own represented faith.

The intertextuality of the scene is revealed by its own concern with the business of storytelling itself. From the tale's beginning, the narrator claims to be telling a story

the dragon and begins her mostly verbal battle with the black demon who next appears to test her, she retells the story of her triumph over the dragon as part of a prayer praising Jesus's power in her salvation. See pages 25 & 27.

from his own lifetime. He establishes his authority from the outset, as we have seen, by claiming both knowledge of God's law and personal knowledge of Margaret; that is, he validates his authority through what he hopes is and what the narrative necessitates as a seamless synthesis. He further attempts to establish his authority in this scene by making clear how it is that he knows what Margaret suffered while in prison. He provides eye-witness testimony: the saint's "uoster-moder"--"foster-mother" has been caring for her during her imprisonment and "Heo . . . & monie ma biheolden purh an eipurl"--"She . . . and many more watched through a window" (21) as the dragon came upon the maiden. Jacobus de Voragine calls Margaret's being swallowed by the dragon "apocryphal and not to be taken seriously" (369) so perhaps the English author felt a particular need to establish the validity of his version. Jacobus's more canonical story is that the dragon threatened Margaret but disappeared when she made the sign of the cross. The Latin tradition of the story relates that Margaret was vomited by the dragon, which was irritated after by the sign of the cross she had made before being swallowed.¹⁰⁰ His anxiety over establishing the facts of how he knows the truth of Margaret's story indicates the worldly quality of the

¹⁰⁰See Delaney's entry "Margaret of Antioch" for further details.

theological discourse he takes so naturally as granted and reveals a dispersal of his authority. That he tells a story that would have been more accepted in a country where Margaret was already a patron of childbirth indicates one cultural factor in his narrative decision.

He claims, also, that he is solely responsible for the spread of Margaret's story. He says of himself:

Ich ah wel to witen bis, for, i pine of prisun þer ha
wes iput in, ich hire fluttunge fond, & fleschliche
fode; & ich iseh hwer ha faht wið þe feorliche feont, &
hire bone wes þat ich hit write on boc-felle, & hire
liflade lette don o leaue, & sende hit soðliche iwriten
wide 3ont te worlde. (53)

[I should know all this because during the pain she was put in in prison, I provided her with sustenance and food for her body; and I saw where she fought with the fearful fiend, and her request was that I write it down on vellum, and her (way of) life set down on leaves, and [that I] send it truthfully written, widely through the world.]

Such statements make clear the way in which Margaret and her story are made into points of transition between physiological dimensions and theological as well as cultural ones. In its staging of the translation from bodily pain to leaves of vellum, the passage reifies the hierarchical dichotomy between text and body to continue the tale's authority. The statement follows the typical Christian, Neoplatonic teleologic course of humanity: from a body weighted with pain and in need of sustenance, Margaret becomes immortal through her story and her faith as the

angels carry her soul to heaven at the tale's end (53) while Teochimus carries it through the world. But at the same time the passage's translational, narrative functions point us towards the articulations that have created the naturalized, hierarchical distinction between soul and body.

Additionally, this tale of male lust and female virginity highlights this distinction as also being one of sexual difference; even as the tale inverts the classical notion of the male as representative of intellect and the female of emotion and appetite, it recalls this notion. We see Margaret lying somewhere in between soul and body, life and death, man and woman. While the perspective this paper has been developing indicates the permeable nature of even these most standard of terms, the narrator's narratively necessary foregrounding of Margaret's liminality is the capacity that at once allows the story to deploy the virgin saint in its Christian lesson and exposes the limits of its narrative frame--which is its theological frame--in providing transcendent truths for its readers.

The desire to move ever closer to the truth of the story as versus other contradictory or less satisfying truths suggests a certain authorial anxiety. The story calls on authority and authoritative practices constantly to establish for itself its proper position in the genealogy of English Christian faith. But why would Teochimus think that

there might be a mistake about this genealogy?¹⁰¹ His anxieties reveal why. The tale's attempts to negate difference and circumscribe unity--which mirror larger theological, philosophical, and political attempts--reveal the already divided nature of the truth that the tale so much wants Margaret's sealed body to hold. Seinte Marherete stamps and restamps its seal on Margaret's body in its attempts to make her signify in one crystalline way. Yet in these repetitions--copies upon copies which are nevertheless intrinsic to the (re)production and continuation of Christian faith--lie all the intertextual references that divide and disperse "Margaret's body" and indicate that it exists also somewhere outside (intersections of) discourse. From this perspective faith and salvation seem to lie in this dispersal itself. Even though the prevalent desire in the text is the desire to prescribe faith and the attainment of salvation, the structure of this system reveals the gaps in this attempt. The seal on Margaret's body--which is meant to be its transcendent signifier--is necessarily dispersed by its very claim to truth, for such a claim, specific to time, place, and materialities of bodies, languages, and texts, does nothing so much as suggest the absence of access to any such transcendence. Faith, then, becomes located in

¹⁰¹For his similar reading practice see Derrida's "Limited Inc a b c"

the very specific moments of intersection between "bodi . . . ban . . . [and a] boc of . . . pine"--"body . . . bones . . . [and a] book . . . of pain" (48). That is, faith and the salvation it predicates seem to exist in a vast web of disseminative semiotic practices and various physiologies, texts, and moments in time. Specific intersections produce doctrine and dogma or the events from which these things are instigated, but it is the uncontrollable and ultimately unknowable extent of this web--knowable, indeed, only at its intersections--that necessitates the constant repetition, which becomes variation, of articles of faith. Margaret's sealed body is like Constance's ever-dying living on body in that both are monuments to a system the main function of which seems to be to petrify itself--by its own signs, by its own guardians, by the way it surveys and keeps knowledge. But the invocation of Margaret's name when something is going wrong during the delivery of a child or when labor pain is so great that it is unspeakable implies the "always also somewhere else" quality of flesh. And it is this possibility for "elsewhereness" that splits the seal on Margaret's body and on any claim to truth which it may be called on to represent.

CHAPTER FOUR
MARIAN METONYMY AND FOLDS OF SIGNIFICATION
IN PEARL

God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said, something is said. And a contradiction in terms is created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable. This contradiction is to be passed over in silence rather than resolved verbally.

Saint Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana

It is decidedly not the intention of this paper to introduce a radically new interpretation of the Middle English Pearl, a poem which has already been done almost to death by its interpreters.

Charles Moorman, "The Role of the Narrator in Pearl"

On the most basic level, symbols surrounding the Holy Virgin attempt to name the unnameable. Similarly, as studies dealing with the inexpressibility topos in Pearl¹⁰² indicate, the poem's recapitulative formal qualities, embodying the central spherical metaphor of the poem, that eponymous ✕ jewel, foreground the gap between time- and space-bound human language and the total otherness of divinity. The poem's success, however, lies not solely in an ostensibly effective realistic or allegorical representation of that

¹⁰²For a sample of critical positions on this topos see Bogdanos, Schotter, and Curtius (159-62).

which, according to Augustine as typical of the period's thinkers, cannot be represented.¹⁰³ Rather the poem's success lies also in its recognition of its own limitations, the limitations of language, and even those of its own very elaborate formal qualities. The influence of human desire that ends the dream vision illustrates not merely the commonplace that language must always fail to bridge the gap between the human and the divine but also the excesses from which art itself springs.¹⁰⁴

Excess is one fundamental avenue by which the period understood original sin and the lapse in the garden. In this way, as the yoking of Eve and Mary illustrates, excess was narratively productive of salvational history and more specifically of the Incarnation, the godhead manifest in "cloutes . . . / . . . bounden so misesli [uncomfortably]-- / fro heuene . . . i-sent" (Fourteenth 58:46-48). The yoking

¹⁰³Early readers & editors of the text often understood the poem as strictly autobiographical, a father's story of coming to understand the death of his daughter. Subsequent readers found allegorical or symbolical significance in the work's main images. See Wellek for a synopsis of such early twentieth-century positions. Wellek himself ultimately concludes that the poem is an elegy with allegorical implications making the narrator/poet's loss a universal experience. Robertson understands the poem through the four traditional levels of medieval exegesis, while Spearing argues that the poem provides its own exegesis, none other being necessary.

¹⁰⁴Shoaf, "Purgatorio and Pearl," writes of the influence specifically of eroticism in the poem in comparison to Dante's work.

of Eve and Mary also illustrates how excess vexes each retelling of this salvational narrative. Such vexation is apparent in the Pearl narrator's repeated misinterpretations¹⁰⁵ of the Pearl maiden's ostensibly salvific words.

However before we turn to an analysis of her words--she who is "Corounde . . . quene in blysse" (line 415)¹⁰⁶ as bride of Christ--and the poem's symbolism and form, we should first consider representations of Mary--*regina caelori*, "wyndow" and "yate of hewen" (Fourteenth 41:24 & 27). The mixture of "The regal role of Mary as the mother of the God-Emperor" (Warner 105)¹⁰⁷ and her seemingly more passive liminal role indicates the very fluid character at the base of the semiotic practices that created the period's faith. To recognize such multivalence at the origin of Christian representation of the Virgin is to understand the ineffability that is the *telos* of faith. An investigation of certain metaphors of the Virgin along with the logic of Pearl's form and imagery will reveal a systemic move toward

¹⁰⁵For a sampling of criticism on this perspective see Bullón-Fernández; Carlson; Clopper; Fast; Stanbury Seeing intro.; and Torti.

¹⁰⁶Line 414 explicitly states the relationship between Christ and the Pearl maiden: "He toke my self to Hys maryage."

¹⁰⁷Warner establishes that this representation was popular from the sixth century onwards.

ossification, a move conveyed, however, by this underlying fluidity. By understanding the logic of solidification and how it becomes able to form(alize) itself via a fundamental overdetermination,¹⁰⁸ we can understand the import of the Pearl, which lies not so much in its tour de force of form but in its textual refusal to idolize or monumentalize its accomplishments.¹⁰⁹ In the same way that Mary physiologically manifests the interdependence between body and salvation, the pearl, shifting in meaning from context to context, is a figure that metonymically marks the contiguity between human and divine.

One way to understand this contiguity is to realize the framing devices the poem uses. Ian Bishop analyzes historical contexts of the poem itself and thematic settings of the pearl symbol. Even though much work has gone on since his analysis, his perspective provides a useful frame for my investigation into the settings of Pearl. Bishop's earlier essay "The Significance of the 'Garlande Gay' in the Allegory of Pearl" focuses on the many different ways the

¹⁰⁸My reading here is built upon Irigaray's work in "The 'Mechanics' of Fluids," which theorizes space and the fluidity of metaphors.

¹⁰⁹According to Schotter's Augustinian reading, "Words which admitted their own inadequacy were held to be less likely to lead to idolatry than those which took themselves for granted, as Augustine, following Plato and Plotinus, had pointed out" (28).

Pearl Maiden and pearls are framed by or frame various settings, more of which below. Mary similarly has to do with the frame or the furniture of heaven. The *vierges ouvranes* constitute one example of the theme of the *sedes sapientiae*. Since Jesus is the word and the Wisdom of God incarnate, she who carried him becomes his seat or support (Attwater 267). This theme is part of a larger one that reminds the faithful of the connection of Mary's flesh to Christ's and therefore ultimately to salvation. A late thirteenth or early fourteenth century *vierge ouvranne* from the Middle Rhine represents a crowned and enthroned nursing Madonna when closed. The statue opens to reveal the adult Christ enthroned, holding a crucifix and surrounded by scenes of salvational history.¹¹⁰ Such representations, along with others like monstrances in which the host is held in the body of Mary,¹¹¹ remind the faithful of the necessary, liminal quality of the Holy Virgin, and more generally of the female body, within this salvational narrative. To reinitiate a concern of the first chapter of this project, Mary represents the failure of the old law and the inauguration of the new incarnational law. As the case of the Annunciation/Incarnation has illustrated, Mary

¹¹⁰See Bynum, "The Female Body," figure 6.11.

¹¹¹See Bynum, "The Female Body," figure 6.10.

translated the Word into flesh and in so doing began the redemption of human language, "for if language had fallen with Adam, it had been redeemed by Christ's condescending to take on human flesh--and therefore human speech" (Schotter 24). She is a "tokne þat pays [peace] scholde be / By-tuexte god and manne" (Fourteenth 32:15-16), the medium through which the light of God must pass and be refracted to be apprehensible to humanity.¹¹²

Mary's translational functions also include her activities after Jesus's and her own death. By taking a look at her roles as teacher on earth, then as queen of and passageway into heaven, we can begin to understand how she was kept narratively from attaining any one all-subsuming significance and how, in this liquescence, the medieval faithful wrote "nostra effige" onto the face of God (Alighieri Canto 33, line 131). Via the pathway of Marian imagery we will see how, even if he does not see himself reflected in the New Jerusalem his sight enters, the Pearl narrator is productive of that landscape.¹¹³

¹¹²The image of Mary as glass, undamaged by the light that passes through it, is a common one exemplified in Brown, 32:74.

¹¹³While appreciative of the poem's representation of human drama, Bogdanos argues that the poem fails on some fundamental level to provide a picture of heaven that is human on any level (*passim*, but particularly his concluding chapter). In contrast, Stanbury in Seeing the Gawain-Poet argues that the text is organized around the narrator's

In section eight of the poem, the maiden attempts to explain to the narrator her relation as a queen of heaven to Mary, whom the narrator understands to be "þe quen of cortaysye" from whom all "grace . . . grewe" (lines 432 & 425). The Pearl Maiden also calls Mary the "quene of cortaysye" (456) but adds to this a feudal connotation:

þat emperise al heuenez hatz--
And vrþe and helle--in her bayly;
Of erytage 3et non wyl ho chace,
For ho is quen of cortaysye. (441-44)

[That empress has all heaven, earth, and hell within her castle walls {dominion}; she will chase none from their heritage because she is the queen of courtesy.]

Mary's queenship was a traditional aspect of poetic figuration. Richard of Saint Lawrence¹¹⁴ describes her as queen of three provinces, "coelestium, terrestrium, et infernorum" just as our poet does (qtd in Fletcher 7). Brown's lyric collections contain thirteen references to the title "quen[e]" in thirteenth-century and five in fourteenth-century lyrics (Gross 86).¹¹⁵ The beginnings of

perception as a way of representing human limitations; the description of heaven can, therefore, be only human.

¹¹⁴This work has been attributed to Albertus Magnus, as Fletcher does in his article based on the *De Laudibus*.

¹¹⁵Based on the lyric usages, Gross argues that Mary as queen is merely one of several conventional terms of praise of her beauty and dignity, not a description of power.

Mary's imperial status can be seen in stories about the life she led after Jesus's death.

The N-Town "Assumption of the Virgin" begins with a collection of Jews discussing the threat Mary still poses to their society after Jesus's death:

. . . of on thing I warne yow at the gynnyng:
 His [Jesus's] dame is levyng, Mary that men call;
 Myche pepil halt hire wythall.
 Wherefore in peyne of reprefe,
 Yif we suffre hyre thus to relefe,
 Oure lawys sche schal make to myscheffe,
 And meche schame don vs sche schall. (lines 59-65)

[. . . of one thing I warn you at the beginning:
 Jesus's mother, whom men call Mary, is living; many
 people hold with her; hence in pain of reproof, if we
 let her remain thus, she shall make mischief of our
 laws and shall do much shame to us.]

One threat she poses is her "hie lore," or "high learning" (line 137). As representations of the Annunciation make clear, Mary was believed to be a woman of serious and complete education in Jewish law. The N-Town "Assumption" play indicates that Mary was also a teacher, that her "fayre speche" has "bredyn a stench" of belief in the living Christ (71 & 70). Bynum notes late medieval visual representations of Mary as a priest (Figure 6.12). Bynum observes, however, that such images "have nothing to do with claiming sacerdotal functions for ordinary women. Mary is priest because it is she who offers to ordinary mortals the saving flesh of God, just as the celebrant does in the mass" (212). Yet, apocryphal sources show the Virgin in a position of

authority, albeit not a strictly ministerial one as she continues to have the ear of several of the apostles. We see her in a position of teacher to John, Peter, and James in the "Twentieth Discourse of Cyril of Jerusalem." The text reveals that as Mary is about to die, she calls these apostles before her "reminding them of the life of Jesus" and instructing them, according to the wishes of Jesus, to build a "great church" over her grave (James 197).

Similarly, "The Discourse of Theodosius" has Mary preaching to the apostles, this time about the horrors of death and how they will be extinguished (198-201). In "The Discourse of Saint John the Divine" Mary takes on the clerical function of burning incense and directing John in prayers about her death (202). Additionally, in a role that was to become traditional, Mary becomes an intercessor for humanity, even at her own death, praying:

I beseech thy name which is greatly extolled, O Christ, God, King of the ages, only-begotten of the Father, receive thine handmaid, thou that didst vouchsafe to be born of me the lowly one to save mankind by thine unutterable dispensation. Every man that calleth upon or entreateth or nameth the name of thine handmaid, grant him thine help. (207)

This intercession is strikingly similar to that provided by the priest via the mass and again, we see Mary as a translational term within the process of salvation. As intercessor Mary is also active, suggesting a potent, if

overwritten, aspect of the medium in which the Word was made manifest.

After her death, Mary's regal power grew. Gertrud Schiller describes a common fourteenth-century portrayal of the crowned Mary (1: 47-48). Even though she sits on a stool or the ground and is called the "Madonna of Humility," she is crowned not only by a rayed halo but also by twelve stars, the crown of the Apocalyptic woman of Revelations:

a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her, feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child . . . ¹¹⁶

This passage was read exegetically to refer to Mary's role in salvation (Attwater 29), and an examination of Schiller's example (figure 106) with this tradition in mind reveals the authority of even this humble Mary. Even though this is a picture of Mary as mother, holding the Christ child, it depicts a subject with considerable presence. With his back towards the lower lefthand corner of the frame and showing only two thirds of his face to the viewer, the Christ child is not the dominant figure, although he is at the picture's center. Instead, Mary forms a triangle that encompasses him physically, while the triforium-shaped frame mimes the shape of Mary's head and left shoulder (the third scallop mimes the top of the Christ child's head).

¹¹⁶Revelations 12: 1-2.

This physical comprehension parallels Mary's temporal and spiritual comprehension of the uncrowned Christ child in the image as it brings together many elements of the cultural matrix that Mary represents. She is at once crowned by stars as queen of heaven, prefiguring salvation for all humanity, as well as the Second Coming, while she holds the vehicle of that salvation in her lap. In Mary's holding the Christ child, the painting recalls the *sedes sapientia*: the crowned Mary is also the throne of Jesus. Additionally, the title "Madonna of Humility" and the figure's close proximity to the ground should remind us of another aspect of Marian imagery--the cultural inheritance of being female.

"Humility" is from the Latin *humilis*, meaning lowly, mean, base, but more originally from *humus* or ground. This virtuous humility seems to be the recuperated form of the otherwise threatening fecund maternal matter of the earth. Like the sloughed off matter of the reproductive flesh of Saint Margaret's dragon, Mary's humility, even from her position of the crowned and enthroned Queen of Heaven (albeit a different type of enthroning, an "in-throning"), points towards very material basis of an ostensibly transcendent salvation and system of virtue.

As with the other forms Mary takes, as Queen of Heaven she is meant to continue reproducing faith. The fecundity of

the "garden enclosed" and the "sealed fountain" (Song of Songs 4:12) is never in question. In an "Orison of the Five Joys" dating from the first half of the fourteenth century, a petitioner prays to "marie, quene of heuene" (26: 1) to take his "saule to heuene, per-in a place to fille" (26: 56). Whereas this sinner believes in his soul's potential to gain heaven, the poem's tenth stanza makes clear the embodied state of Mary's residency:

Marie, for pat swe[te] ioye wan pou from erpe was tan,
In-to þe blisse of heuene with aungeles mani an,
& i-set bi swete ihesu in fel [skin] & flecsch & ban,
þou bringe me to ioyes pat neuere schal be gon. (37-40)

That Mary reigned bodily in heaven was a commonplace. To continue with the opening scene of the N-Town, we can see how this belief was expressed. After discussing Mary's threat to their society while alive, the Jewish priests and leaders consider the power of her corpse as they plan to "brenne here body and the aschis hide, / and don here all the dispith" (lines 84-5) they can devise. In this Christian pedagogical piece even the Jews recognize the power of Mary's flesh in reproducing faith. They even believe that once Mary is dead and her body done away with, they can safely "sle tho disciplis" without having the "comownys" rise up against them (86 & 81). The disappearance of Mary's body would have political efficacy, offering no more "myscheffe" to their "lawys."

Reminding her son that he is "god and man of [her] bodye" (105), Mary prays to be reunited with Jesus in heaven, a request granted by Jesus, here named Sapientia. As in apocryphal accounts, Mary has some time--here three days--to prepare herself before her death.¹¹⁷ She asks to see the apostles and they appear magically at her door. Throughout this recounting, as in the York Plays and the apocrypha, that Mary's death will be bodily is stressed. The verb used is the common one, "to d(e)ye," as in lines 139 and 257 in the N-Town and 44, 104, and 132 in York. "The Death of Mary" in the York cycle additionally emphasizes the "peynes" and "sikenes" (lines 37 & 92) of Mary. Also following apocryphal sources, each play recounts the double nature of Mary's death. First her "flech . . . feble be nature" (N-Town, line 302) "expirand" (129)--or expires transitively--her soul: "*hic exiet anima marie de corpore in sinu dei*" (stage direction between lines 329 & 330). As her soul thus rises into the "fold" of God, Mary is left on earth as a corpse, about which Jesus gives the apostles explicit directions for

¹¹⁷See James' edition of the "Coptic Texts," 195-96, "The Discourse of Theodosius," 198-99, and "The Greek Narrative of Saint John the Divine," 201-07 for typical accounts. All agree on the threat Mary offered to Jewish society, the collection of the apostles from their international preaching, and Mary's bodily death. However, the texts disagree on how long Mary remains alive between the announcement that she will die and her death. They also disagree on the amount of time her soul was with Jesus before he returned for her body. Also see Warner, 82-6.

burial and protection from the scheming Jews. Even Mary's corpse, however, is prolific: her soulless body, that is matter without form, is efficacious in converting those outside the fold or increasing the faith of those already within it. In the N-Town, even as the apostles pray to the "swete soule of mary" (313) for Jesus's grace, the Jews scheme to take the body and make of its immolation a public spectacle. As the apostles carry it towards the gravesite, one of the Jewish leaders attempts to snatch the body off its bier, resulting in painful consequences:¹¹⁸ "Allas, my body is ful of peyne! / I am fastened sore to this bere! / myn handys are ser [withered] bothe tweyne" (395-97). "The Latin Narrative of Pseudo-Melito" goes into further detail describing how "his hands dried up from his elbows and clave to the bier. And when the apostles lifted the bier, part of him was hanging and part clave to the bier" (214). The way in which Mary's body has power over others in contiguity with it creates a network of bodies. In the case of Pearl, the jewel will have a similar function.

The incident of the Jew's withered hands is strikingly similar to a midwife's attempt to "make trial" of Mary's

¹¹⁸Again, this drama is very close to apocryphal sources. "The Latin Narrative of Pseudo-Melito" (page 214) describes the same scene while other texts of the Assumption depict the Jews being burned and blinded ("The Discourse of Theodosius") or just burned ("The Greek Narrative of Saint John the Divine").

virginity, a story recounted in the Protevangelium, chapter 20. After her test of the new mother's virginity, the midwife's hand fell off her "in fire" (verse 1) and she called out in pain. Like the Jewish leader of the N-Town who asks Peter for "sum medvcyn" (403) to cure his problem, Salome, the midwife calls out for aid. Both receive it when they profess their belief in the miracle of Jesus's birth and life as a human. Peter tells the Jew that he must "beleue in Jhesu criste oure saveyour / and that this was his moder" (406-07) and "honure" the body on the bier before him (409). Such moments recall the threatening quality of the maternal and translational body, a body much like Christ's in this way. The York Plays reinstate this threat with its references to the efficacy of a prayer to Mary during childbirth and recall her sacerdotal functions.¹¹⁰ Even recuperated here within the Christian narratives of salvation and conversion, Mary's body has physiological and psychological potency, a potency more striking in Assumption texts since her soul is already in heaven. As with theories of the Immaculate Conception, Assumption texts incorporate and attempt to sublimate the dangerous matrix of Mary's flesh. At the same time, however, this system's own definition of such matter as prototypically outside the bounds can teach

¹¹⁰See "The Death of Mary," line 147 and "The Appearance of Our Lady to Thomas," line 193.

us to listen and read in ways other than in good form(s) (Irigaray 111) by understanding the semiotic networks that produce and enact the idea of heaven, as in the case of Pearl, and more generally, of the truth itself.

As Chapter One points out, the notion of the Immaculate Conception was influenced by a distinction between two kinds of conception: the physiological and the spiritual, called the "animation" (Hirn 224). When the body was infused with the soul, Mary as a human being--that is, a creature with a soul--was created, pure from the beginning as her pure soul cleansed the originally fallen matter of her body. Therefore, Mary was pure in body and soul from conception on, for only from so pure a human source could God/man have arisen. A similar logic founds the stories of Mary's Assumption. The body, conceived without spot, that had once been the home of God should not be subject to decay and consumption by worms (Hirn 410-11). "The Latin Narrative of Pseudo-Melito," popular in the West by the tenth century despite its enigmatic origins (Warner 85),¹²⁰ reveals a typical application of this narrative teleology. As the

¹²⁰Warner's chapter on the Assumption illustrates the way, as does Hirn's, in which popular belief could authorize even the most dubious of sources. Hirn notes, pages 411-12, the way in which the popular belief that there were no relics of Mary, as there were of all other major and minor saints, because she had not left behind a body when she left the earth influenced scholastics and theologians to develop a system of logic that would explain this phenomenon.

apostles lay Mary in her tomb, Jesus arrives and accosts them. Peter tells him that since Mary was his "immaculate chamber" he should "raise up the body of [his] mother and take her . . . into heaven" (16:2). In the same way that the *Præredemptio* seemed a logical necessity in the Incarnation (Warner 242; Hirn 226-27), since Mary's was such a unique incorporation, her bodily assumption also became a necessity.

The period played out this logic in shared representational features. As when Gabriel visited the young Virgin, at the elder Mary's death an angel comes to announce that her prayers to be with her son have been answered. Hirn cites pictorial examples of similarities between pictures of this announcement and the Annunciation (416-17). Even the greetings are similar to Gabriel's "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28). Following apocryphal sources, the N-Town has an angel sent straight from Jesus to greet Mary with the following:

Heyl, excellent prynces, Mary most pure!
 Heyl, radyant sterre, the sunne not so bryth [is]!
 Heyl, Moder of Mercy and mayde most mure [demure]!
 The blessing that God yaf Jacob vpon you now lyth
 [is]. (lines 117-20)

The York Plays add to this similarity by having the greeting spoken by Gabriel himself ("The Death of Mary," lines 1-4).

Even more interesting is that both moments have to do with specifically human concerns being suddenly thrust into a divine or at least superhuman context--a technique of which Pearl will make full use. In the Annunciation, of course, Mary is confused about how she, who knows "no man þat shulde haue fyled / [her] maydenhode" (York Plays, "The Annunciation, and Visit of Elizabeth to Mary," lines 173-4), could be with child. This short-lived anxiety is dilated in Joseph's fear of shame and in the Jewish judges' misbelief and trial of the couple.¹²¹ In the Assumption texts, Mary prays "Wyth all [her] herte and sowle be natures excitacyon" for her death in order to be with her son; all creatures, she knows, want to be with him but, "myche more owe I, youre moder be alye [kindred], / Syn ye wern born God and man of my bodye, / To desyre yowre presens, that were our ferste formacyon" (N-Town, "The Assumption of the Virgin," lines 101 & 104-06). Following later apocryphal and literary sources,¹²² this passage indicates the very human, physiological affiliation she feels for Jesus, whom she also calls a "glorious lord" (line 72). This passage is striking

¹²¹See the Protevangelium 13:1 - 16:3; the York Plays, "Joseph's Trouble about Mary," 102-111; N-Town, "Joseph's Doubt," 108-17, and "The Trial of Joseph and Mary."

¹²²See "The Greek Narrative of Saint John the Divine" (James 201) and "The Latin Narrative of Pseudo-Melito," 3:1. Also, the Golden Legend recounts her sorrow over Jesus's death and her constant desire to be with him again (Hirn 210).

because it begins with a catalogue of the Godhead's power and attributes, yet it returns to "saluacyon"'s physical connection to and reliance upon maternal flesh (line 69). Again here, as with the doubly potent nature of Mary's death, even as Assumption texts tend toward a sense of timeless history connected to salvation, Mary's body continues to return as a specific, material site around which this narrative of transcendence is figured.

Narratives of Mary's death and queenship continue this focus on situational specificity. Early Syriac version of the Virgin's passing to heaven actually do not describe her death; instead, she is translated into heaven attended by the three others who have thus been glorified--Enoch, Elijah, and Jesus (Warner 83-84). However later texts, including all those apocryphal and dramatic texts so far cited in this chapter, specifically illustrate a bodily death of Mary. "The Discourse of Theodosius" makes clear the contextual reasons Mary's passing turned from a *Transitus* into an Assumption.¹³³ As James synthesizes:

¹³³By the last half of seventh century the notion of the Dormition had arrived in Gaul, and by the ninth some liturgical calendars call the feast day the Assumption. Pope Leo IV (847-55) developed a vigil and an octave for the feast day, celebrated 15 August, while Pope Nicholas I (858-67) declared Mary's passing to heaven on par with Christmas and Easter--the Incarnation and the Resurrection (Warner 88).

Jesus spoke [to the apostles] of the necessity of death. If she were translated, "wicked men will think concerning thee that thou art a power which came down from heaven, and that the dispensation (the Incarnation) took place in appearance. (Chapter 4)

As Jesus and Mary talk before her death in the York Plays, the terms of her death are made still clearer. She asks her son that she be spared the horrifying experience of seeing the devil when she dies (line 134). Jesus cannot grant this request, however:

But modir, þe fende must be nedis at þyne endyng,
In figoure full foule for to fere þe;
Myne aungelis schall þan be a-boute þe.
And þerfore, dere dame, þou thar no3t doute þe,
For douteles þe dede schall no3t dere [harm] þe. (154-58)

In other words, the fiend must be there so that her death will be completely human and the salvational narrative will continue. This is one way in which Mary comes to stand metonymically for the whole of humanity and specifically for the faithful of the church. This tradition grew out of the period's reading of the Song of Songs. In an allegorical reading, the bride came to represent the church and the canticle became an expression of God's love of the faithful. Ambrose (340? - 97) was the first father of the Western church to connect the bride of the Song, the church, Mary, and each individual Christian (Warner 126).¹⁴ While the Song

¹⁴See also number 91 in Brown, Fourteenth: "Ihesu þat are kynge of lyf / Tech my soule þat is þy wyf / To loue best no þynge in londe / Bot þe, ihesu, hir dere housbonde" (lines

was used for a variety of purposes, one of the foremost among which was the veneration of virginity, its significances were certainly not mutually exclusive and Mary as church and bride of Christ was a popular image. An "Autumn Song" of the early fourteenth century calls upon this prevalent imagery in describing Mary's place in heaven as that of "bo maiden ant wyue" (50: 10). As representative and metonym for humanity, Mary again seems to find her appropriate place within the salvational narrative. In the same way that Mary's birth and life typologically comprehend the Song of Songs, the semiotic network that creates the Assumption comprehends the physical Mary.

But as a look at some art-historical sources and their histories will reveal, this semiotic network is revealed in its very vehicle--the body of Mary and her singular maternal connection to the Godhead. As each story of Mary's ending illustrates, her death is also not typical. That her body would not be subject to decay after death is one indication of the narrative's failure to sublimate even as the Assumption is a narrative necessity. Additionally, Mary's encounter with the devil marks another intersection in which the articulations of her biography and the faith based upon it become apparent. Like the exchange between Margaret and her

demon, Jesus's promise about Mary meeting the devil at her death has to do with a prophecy of her meeting a dragon. Revelations 12 tells of John's vision of the apocalyptic woman, a text upon which the "Madonna of Humility" was based:

And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. . . . And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth; she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron . . . (verses 1-5)

Warner calls this passage a key to understanding the text of the Assumption mass, which celebrates "the conquest of lust and putrefaction" (Warner 92-93). But this crowned woman also suggests a powerful role for Mary in Christ's victory over Satan. A common representation of Mary as vanquisher of evil shows her stepping on the serpent (Warner 268-69; Hirn 416). This tradition grew out of allegorical readings of several seemingly disparate Old Testament verses and the Revelations verses. The relationship between Mary and the serpent of evil begins with a remarkable mistranslation of the curse on humanity in Genesis 3:15: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, / and between your seed and her

seed; / he shall bruise [its] head, and you shall bruise his heel." Hirn describes the mistranslation as follows:

The great prophecy in Genesis . . . has been rendered in the Vulgate by "*Ipsa conteret caput tuum, et tu insidiaberis calcaneo ejus*"--"*She shall bruise thy head, etc.*" (page 416).

The confusion over the gender of nouns in the translation served to add to the Holy Virgin's reputation in the salvational narrative. Another image added to this reputation still further. Psalms 91:13 is part of a meditation on God as protector of the faithful which states that believers "will tread on the lion and the adder" and "will trample under foot" "the young lion and the serpent." Allegorical readings of this verse represented Mary as riding atop a lion and/or serpent. Schiller describes an Adoration compositional type prevalent from the mid-twelfth century in which the Virgin, enthroned, rests her feet atop a bull, a lion, and/or a serpent, signifying her conquering the dragon of Psalms 91:13 (108; figures 279 & 280). Such readings, founded on mistranslations and built up narrative element by narrative element, call attention to the role context plays in signification. Each element, "mistaken" or based on standard theology, plays a part in determining the significance of all other elements and the structure of the whole narrative of salvation, as well as Mary's place within it. Again, our attention is turned to the contiguity between

the element of this system, a contiguity which the Pearl will foreground in similar manner.

Additionally, as Warner points out, the snake had other more widely disseminated significances that survived in some form the Christian appropriation. A complete description of snake cults is outside the bounds of the present project, but, briefly, the snake was believed to be born anew each time it shed its skin and thus was connected to the moon, reborn every month. Thus, the snake and the moon are associated with immortal life and the menstrual cycle. We see these connections deeply buried in the myth of the Fall in Eden: humanity lost eternal life at the subtle bequest of the serpent, who claimed to know the secret of eternal life, and part of the curse was menstruation (Warner 268-69; Weigle 60-1). In her righting of humanity from original sin, Mary serves as a vehicle for the recuperation of the serpent into the Christian narrative. However, as even this brief history of the appropriation of the serpent metaphor and the resurfacing of its more ancient implications makes clear, the palimpsest upon which the salvational narrative is written can never be completely denuded of its traces of other narratives, myths, and the cultures that produced them.

Images--like the Madonna of Humility and the Adoration type--images in which Mary is simultaneously mother and

queen, crowned and barefoot, Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfillment, indicate the medieval exegetical urge towards final signification in which ultimate salvation and the Second Coming subsume all other narratives. Yet as the metonymical and intertextual relationship between the units of the story of salvation makes clear, this desire for final signification seems always to be unrealized. The series of substitutions and mistranslations that produce Mary as the vanquisher of evil and Queen of Heaven evidences nothing so much as the allegorical reading process itself; as it does so it evidences also the desires of its individual practitioners, enraptured by the ideology of Christianity and the possibility that they might, like the Virgin, be comprehended and be made comprehensible by it.

Consequently, "The Death of Mary" in the York Plays ends with a chorus of angels, including Gabriel, and "*uno diablolo. . . . cantant antiphona scilicet Ave regina celorum*"--"a devil. . . . singing, naturally, the antiphon 'Ave! Queen of Heaven'" (following line 194). The devil, a reminder of the serpent, is brought under the canopy of heaven's powers. In the N-Town, demons arrive to carry off the scheming Jews to hell, clearing the way for the Holy Mother's Assumption. Then the Assumption scene itself follows. It includes Apostles, angels, and God, bodies and

souls, heaven and earth. Jesus commands his angels to descend with him to earth "To reyse the body of [his] moder terestyall" (line 492) and bring it to him so that she can know "the vnyte" of heaven (494).¹²⁵ Christ arrives at the sepulcher in his "manhede clere" (498) and greets the Apostles gathered there. John and the archangel Michael take on the task of convincing *Dominus* to raise Mary by reuniting her with her soul, which he had been keeping in heaven. John makes the parallel between mother and son explicit by saying "Lord, as thou rese from deth . . . / So reyse thou this body" (501-02). Michael urges that God "fest" or "fasten" her soul back to her "blissid body" (506) since "sche bare . . . God in [his] mytthtis" (508). *Dominus* does so, saying,

Go thanne, blyssid soule, to that body ageyn.

Arys now, my dowe [dove], my nehebour, and my swete frende,
Tabernacle of joye, vessel of lyf, hefnely temple, to reyn.

Ye schal haue the blysse wyth me, moder, that hath non ende.

For as ye were clene in erthe of alle synnys greyn,
So schul ye reyne in hefne clenest in mend. (509-14)

With this scene, the N-Town ends with a tour de force of discursive sublation, yet in this ending's attempts to be all-comprehensive we can read the contingencies of this world building--the accidents, desires, and untraceable

¹²⁵The York Plays describe Mary's bliss similarly, saying in heaven she will "neuere in two . . . be twynnand," or "sundered" (line 182).

myriad of circumstances that have been solidified into Christianity.

John makes clear the human logic at work in what is supposed to be one of the most profound mysteries of faith; after his request of God, he reasons about the propriety of raising Mary, concluding that to "Vs semyth this ryth is" (504). Michael similarly calls on something in addition to the transcendent truths of heaven to sway God, saying "Hefne and erthe wold thynke this the best now" (507). The earth may be, according to Augustinian sign theory, the book of creation in which the *signa* of God are manifest (Bogdanos 7); yet it is also the place of misinterpretation and the babble of many languages, languages created by God in response to a threat from the humans for whom "nothing . . . will be impossible" with a common language (Genesis 11:6). Such languages suggest different systems of logic and understanding, yet John's and Gabriel's pronouncements reflect the desire to have unity, as does the ultimate idea of Mary's soul being forever reunited with her body, as each Christian's will be. Similarly, this is the type of unity for which the Pearl narrator struggles but which he never grasps, although the poem, in both form and content, tends toward it.

A rhetorical analysis focusing on the logics of metaphor and metonymy will enable me to extend and further clarify the understanding that I have been building. One way to understand many of the past interpretations of this poem is to understand the logic of metaphor. Metaphors work by calling on readers' ideas of difference in order to create a new sense of likeness between things. Metaphoric logic works by replacement of one concept for another but in this process neither concept is lost, although one may be privileged over the other. However, where metaphoric logic becomes solidifying is in the way it monumentalizes difference.¹²⁶ This it does by working in a way similar to that in which the paradox of Mary as mother and maid work: that is, it reinscribes the differences, the categories and boundaries, as it tends towards harmony. Pseudo-Dionysius, who with Augustine had a profound influence on medieval allegorical thought, understood that no metaphor can totally annihilate either of its terms because it can function only to the extent that it states, not negates, its own reality of difference (Bogdanos 109). From this perspective, as exemplified in the Man of Law's Constance, metaphors can be normalizing, crossing categorical boundaries only by

¹²⁶My description here is built on Ricoeur's analyses, particularly in his introduction and his chapter on Aristotle, pages 9-43.

recalling them. Certainly, Pearl uses metaphoric logic, recalling that of the Bible: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45-46).

But there is also another logic at work in Pearl, a metonymic logic or a logic of *contiguity*.¹²⁷ Metonymy exploits the contiguity between things, that is, between something and its attributes, its surroundings, and its components. From the perspective of medieval Christianity, which understood that "Ever since the creation of the world, [God's] invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:20), God inheres in the things of the world; that is, the transcendental signified is immanent manifest. Mary can be seen to highlight this metonymic relationship. The Annunciation, the Incarnation, and the Assumption can be taken as metonymic representations when we understand them as incidents of the narrative of salvation that foreground the contiguous¹²⁸ nature of flesh and the

¹²⁷My understanding of this difference between metaphor and metonymy comes largely from Jakobson and Halle's "Fundamentals of Language (90-96) and Jakobson's "Two Aspects of Language: Metaphor and Metonymy" (119-25).

¹²⁸I understand this term as allied with Derrida's notion of supplementarity (Of Grammatology, 144 & 159).

divine, of things and faith. Mary as both artifact--the bailey and throne--and queen of heaven indicate an underlying fluidness of signification, in which each term in the semiotic network is dependent on others. From the perspective of metonymy we can understand the idealism of Pearl other than in the ostensibly appropriate form of humanity versus divinity. Instead, in its own Incarnational features the poem becomes a site of translation between two realms of knowledge, consequently deconstructing their duality.

That the poem operates by contrasting different perspectives has been well supported,¹²⁹ and I shall not do this reading to death. Instead, the following reading will investigate the way in which the poem calls attention to its frames, frames which cull the part from the whole, providing both with significance. First we will examine some textual framing devices. The eponymous Pearl, a "perle wythouten spot" (lines 12, 24, 36, & 48), begins the tale allied with the *specula sine macula* image of Mary.¹³⁰ Additionally, the Pearl maiden, herself, addresses Mary as the "quene of

¹²⁹That the poem operates upon the intractable difference between human and divine is the basis of Bogdanos' thesis (e.g. 3-4). On the same basic thesis, see also Borroff; Donner; Fast, 376-78; Gross; Johnson 29; Moorman 111-14; Nelson 28-30; Schless 184-85; Schotter; Torti.

¹³⁰See also Song of Songs 4:7, an adumbration of Mary according to medieval exegesis.

cortaysye" (456) and recalls her imperial and physiological functions by comparing her to a "bayly" or outside wall of a castle.¹³¹ In this figure Mary is framed and is framer, much as the Pearl maiden becomes.¹³² At first the poem presents a jewel lost, the pearl that was once "clanly clos in golde so clere" (2) and is now "clad in clot" (22). The "Joylez Juelere" bewails his loss near harvest time "In Augoste in a hy3 seysoun, / Quen corne is coruen [cut] wyth croke3 [sickles] kene" (39-40). Scholars have linked this seasonal timing, as well as the herbs growing in the "erbere" or garden (9), with the Holy Virgin, the fifteenth of August being the feast day of the Assumption (Stern 76). The Pearl maiden is multiply framed by these opening lines. Connected to the Holy Virgin more than just with these and other textual references, the image of the pearl is similarly a transitional image.

When the narrator falls asleep and begins his dream vision, he enters a magical landscape where we begin to see metonymic logic at work more precisely. The pearl image next appears as a part of this landscape. As the narrator walks,

¹³¹In his edition, Morris metonymically glosses this word as "authority, jurisdiction, dominion," not mentioning the architectural basis of the word.

¹³²Focusing on effects of gazing, in the Lacanian sense, Stanbury, "Feminist," investigates ways in which the text gives the Pearl maiden authority within her frame of reference but also destabilizes this authority.

gazing at the "crystal klyffez so cler of kynde" (74) and the trees with trunks "as blwe as ble of Ynde [India]" (76) and leaves like "bornyst syluer"--"burnished silver" (77), he hears the crunching of gravel under his feet. He looks down to find that it consists of "precious perlez of oryente" (82). These pearls--recalling the whole of the poem and figuratively allied with every other pearl in this vision--metonymically represent the character of this landscape, in the same way that the narrator's grief for the lost pearl framed the first five stanzas of the poem. Where the pearl was before singular, a lost object of grief, the image has now been multiplied and translated from the grave-like "huyle" where the pearl had fallen (41) to the expansive landscape of the dream. This landscape, in between the human world of death and harvest and the timeless, heavenly New Jerusalem, is indebted to both the religious and the erotic visionary traditions. Precedents like John's apocalyptic vision and Dante's Comedia abound on the religious side.

In addition, Patricia Kean has written specifically about the landscape, arguing that Eden and the *hortus conclusus* are models for the magically artful landscape of Pearl (Kean 98-113).¹³³ From the erotic tradition, the love

¹³³Cf. Song of Songs 4:12.

garden or the garden of *Deduit* from *La Roman de la Rose*, the fallen Eden, offers a precedent (Bogdanos 38; Stanbury, *Seeing* 18). Given the semiotic weight of pearls in the period, this translation of the pearl image offers a metonymic glimpse of the indeterminacy of this highly intertextual setting, as allegorical and lapidary texts would indicate.

In the Middle Ages, pearls were called Margarita stones, connecting them to the purity and virtues of Saint Margaret. Thomas Usk, in his *Testament of Love* encapsulates these virtues into three bodily goods--bodily comfort, protection against passions of evil men, and stanching blood--and translates them into the virtues of purity, humility, and the healing effect of beloved on lover (Bogdanos 15). Lapidary lore had pearls being made "of þe dewe of heuen" and having powers "a3ens rennyng of blod, & a3ens þe flyx of þe wombe" and powers to comfort "lymes & membris" because they can cleanse away "superfluite of humors & fasten the lymes" (*English* 107-08). Such virtues coincided with medieval exegetical practices. I have already noted Matthew 13:45-46, the parable of the pearl of great price, in which the pearl stands for the kingdom of God. Similarly, Matthew 7:6 relates pearls to attaining God's kingdom: "Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw

your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you." Or exegetically, do not give the Word of God to the spiritually unprepared lest they misunderstand and misuse it. Additionally, pearls show up as part of the kingdom itself, as the gates of the New Jerusalem (Revelations 21:21).

However, exegetically speaking, pearls also carried a negative weight. The whore of Babylon is "bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls" (Revelations 17:4), while after the destruction of Babylon, the town's merchants are themselves "Joylez Juelere[s]" (Pearl, line 252), mourning their lost "cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls" (Revelations 18:12). Additionally, as Dolores Frese argues in her work on Chaucer's Pardoner and its relation to Le Roman de la Rose, the gravel that covers the river bed in the garden of Deduit, like the pearly gravel in the Pearl's magical landscape, is suggestive of semen. As a sign, semen can have negative or positive connotations because, as Augustine says, in the "torrent of the human race, both elements are carried along together--both evil which is derived from him who begets, and the good which is bestowed by Him who creates us" (qtd. in Frese 64). Within these few examples are evident the various nature of the pearl as image; it is a symbol both of perfection and transcendence and of

mutability and moral corruption (Bogdanos 17). All that distinguishes a good pearl from a bad one, it seems, is the setting of the pearl, the semiotic context that provides it with signification. Like the translated "dewe of heuen" that forms a pearl, the image of the pearl is itself fluid; and this fluidness, infusing and infused by each context in which it signifies, operates in Pearl as a collateral logic to that of the poem's dualism. Indeed, as the relation between Mary's regal and liminal roles suggests, this primary indeterminacy founds the artistic urge to monumentalize the ideality of Christian logic and turn "Gilofre, gyngure . . . gromlyoun"--"gillyflower, ginger, . . . gromwell" (43) and their wafting "fayrre refflayr"--"fair odor" (46) into the "bornyst syluer" (77) icons of dogma.

As the pearl image is translated from the "erber" to the magical landscape and as it is seen on the Pearl maiden and as the Pearl maiden, it has been subject to many different interpretations. Those who would read the poem via the four-tiered strategy of allegory understand the pearl to have spiritual significance right from the poem's beginning.¹³⁴ There are those who understand the pearl to be

¹³⁴For a sampling of such a critical position, see Bishop, 95; Chance; although Hoffman argues against the allegorical interpretation, he believes the pearl to be the same throughout the poem (91); Johnson 33; Robertson, "'Heresy'" 292 & "The Pearl" 25; Stern.

a symbol, believing that the poem provides its own exegesis, no outside systems being necessary (Spearing 123). Those who do what might be called a psychological reading, understand the pearl to be secular and personal at the poem's beginning but with changing significances throughout the work (Conley, "Pearl" 57). The importance of these various and contradictory readings to this project is not in using one or the other of them to uphold yet another interpretation of the pearl image; instead, these readings help us to focus on how the poem works, how it calls attention to the process of signification by repeatedly relocating and reinterpreting the pearl image.

The next location of the pearl is in the clothing of a "faunt" or "child" (161) the narrator sees. Gradually it becomes clear that this child is the pearl that the narrator lost in the erber. As the reader becomes aware of this construction and characteristics begin to adhere to the character of the Pearl maiden, the poem teaches yet another lesson in how significance accrues. The narrator sees the maiden on the other side of a stream, which he realizes is "a deuyse / Bytwene myrpez"--"a device / Between joys" (140) planned to divide him from "paradyse" (137) on the other side. Even this naive narrator realizes the fabricated quality of his surroundings. The narrator is amazed to see

"A mayden of menske [honor], ful debonere" in a "Blysnande whyt"--"shining white" gown (162 & 163). Like the jewel that he once possessed "clanly close in golde so clere" (2), she looks like "glysnande golde" (165) sitting on the opposite bank with a face as "whyt as playn yuore [ivory]" (178). Like the Man of Law, he fears (losing) her "gostly" presence (185) even as he solidifies her through description:

Bot gracios gay withouten galle,
 So smope, so smal, so seme sly3t,
 Rysez vp in hir araye ryalle,
 A precios pyece in perlez py3t. (189-92)

[That gracious, gay {one} without gall, so smooth, so small so seemly slight, rose up in her royal array, a precious piece in pearls fixed or arrayed.]

These lines echo the original description of the first stanza in which the narrator describes his lost pearl as "rounde," "smal," and "smope" (5 & 6). Stanza seventeen intensifies the pearl imagery in its description of the maiden's white gown which is "with precios perlez al vmbepy3te [surrounded]" (204). Stanza eighteen describes her crown "Of marjorys and non oper ston"--"of Margerys [pearls] and no other stone" (206). However, stanza nineteen makes most clear the metonymic logic at work in this landscape and in the relationship between the dreamer/narrator and the maiden and the poem and its readers. It describes the most remarkable pearl that arrays her gown:

Bot a wonder perle withouten wemme
 Inmyddez hyr breste watz sette so sure;

A mannez dom mo3t dry3ly demme
 Er mynde mo3t malte in hit mesure.
 I hope no tong mo3t endure
 No sauerly saghe say of þat sy3t,
 So watz hit clene and cler and pure,
 Þat precios perle þer hit watz py3t.

Py3t in perle, þat precios pryse (221-29)

[But a wondrous pearl without spot, in the middle of her breast was set securely; a man's judgment could rapidly fade, before a mind could speak it in moderation; I think no tongue could endure nor sweetly say a word of that sight, so clean, clear, and pure it was, that precious pearl where it was fixed, that precious prize fixed in pearl.]

The narrator then addresses her as "perle . . . in perlez py3t" (241). Even, it would seem, in this magical landscape where the narrator's gaze turns everything into art (Stanbury, Seeing 17), there are some things that are inexpressible, things that make judgment fail. Yet as the maiden becomes what the narrator sees her wearing, the conventionality of signification becomes apparent, even in the basic convention of the inexpressibility topos. Additionally, her being "with-uten wemme" reminds us intertextually of her contiguous relationship with Constance¹³⁵ and more fundamentally with Mary and the cultural matrix she disseminates.

The pearl on the maiden's breast seems to represent her metonymically just as she represents that paradise across the stream metonymically, as the text later reveals. But the

¹³⁵See The Man of Law's Tale, Fragment 2, line 924.

above passage makes clear the reciprocal relationship of making meaning as it foregrounds the failures of language by using language and invoking the fluid processes of signification. Such processes are indicated most powerfully in the circular "Bat precios perle per hit watz py3t, / Py3t in perle bat precios pryse." Repeating the verb "py3t," "to fix"--forms of which were used also in descriptions of the maiden's dress--reveals the urge in this signifying system to make this pearl mean something, to fix it in time and space. But the way in which this passage and the several stanzas that precede it actually make the pearl into the pearl illustrates the way in which this fixity is only a rest-stop in the web that gives the passage meaning. As the variation of exegetical precedents evidences, the passage is intertextually aligned with scriptural and theological texts of all types.

Additionally, since the magical landscape and the text as a whole are intertextually interdependent, conventions of romance play a large part in the way the poem works.¹³⁶ By noting how the metonymic characteristics of the first stanza's pearl become the maiden of the landscape, we can understand the way in which the poem foregrounds its own artifice, teaching us to read in ways other than simply

¹³⁶For a sampling of pertinent essays see Bullón-Fernández; Gross; Roper 169; Spearing 135.

passing over in silence with our judgment faded. What the metonymic construction of the maiden illustrates is not so much what the ideal is like but rather how the notion of ideality is reached. Since metonymy and contiguity can also be understood as placing things into serial relationship, looking at the series of substitutions in the text will help me to further clarify this idea. Pearls are substituted for pearls and each variation becomes the focal point for a new context. When an image, and not an ostensibly external idea, becomes such an anchor for a context, the narrative urge toward plenitude becomes more apparent. In other words, as characteristics aggregate into this character, the ideal is being articulated. In the same way that Mary articulated the Word, this poem attempts to represent the transcendent through the physicalness of form and sound, with the primary paradox of the poem being that "the ideal world, which is meant to transcend time and space, is represented here by its very contradiction, an image, an artifact of time and space" (Bogdanos 3). However, in the same way that Mary acts as the translational site or the term of contiguity between heaven and earth, the metonymic logic of the poem undoes the logic of paradox, the logic of duality, the logic of metaphor on a fundamental level.

The Pearl maiden calls on metaphoric logic and exegetical practice when she cites Matthew 13:45-46, the

parable of the pearl of great value. In lines 730 through 734, she retells the parable adding that this

makellez perle þat bo3t is dere

 Is lyke þe reme of heuenesse clere--
 So sayde þe Fader of folde and flode--
 For hit is wemlez, clene and clere,
 And endelez rounde and blyþe of mode,
 And commune to all þat ry3twys were.
 Lo! euen inmyddez my breste hit stode:
 My Lorde þe Lombe þat schede Hys blode,
 He py3t hit pere in token of pes. (733-42)

[this matchless pearl that is bought dear . . . is like the realm of bright heaven, so said the father of earth and flood, for it is spotless, clean and clear, and endlessly round and joyous in mood, and common to all who are righteous; Lo! even in the middle of my breast it remains; my lord the lamb that shed his blood, he fixed it there as a token of peace]

In the same way that Mary stands for Christian sublation and its failure or in the same way that the Man of Law interchanges law for the body of Constance or Teochimus Margaret's body for Christ's, the passage sets up a series of substitutions. As Stanbury has so forcefully pointed out in her investigation of the poem's scopophilic tendencies, this passage metonymically allies the maiden's body with the lamb, who reigns in the poem's New Jerusalem ("Feminist" 101). But the series is not just a dual one between maiden and her "make" or mate, the lamb (759); it also includes the "fader," the earth and seas, the pearl itself, and the biggest of all celestial bodies, heaven. In such metonymic

relationships the body continues to reappear, recuperated but ever-present.

As Kevin Marti has pointed out in Body, Heart, and Text in the Pearl-Poet, Christ's body is the spatial center of medieval culture (6). In the ritual reenactment of the Incarnation that is the Eucharist, each Christian's body participates in the Christic redemption of the flesh. Scholars point to lines 457-68 of Pearl, which relate the Biblical similitude of Christians being the limbs of Christ, and the poem's allusion to the sacrament in lines 1208-10¹³⁷ as the loci of understanding the poem as itself incarnational.¹³⁸ Formally the poem attempts to incarnate its central symbol, the pearl, in its recapitulative aspects. The poem is tightly constructed throughout, connecting five stanzas at a time by the use of *concatenatio*, or the repetition of key words in the beginning and ending lines of each stanza. These five-stanza groups are linked by the repetition in the first line of the next stanza of the concatenating of the previous stanza group.¹³⁹ The poem concretizes this circularity by ending upon virtually the

¹³⁷"In Krystez dere blessing and myn, / Dat in þe forme of bred and wyn / Þe preste vus schewez vch a daye."

¹³⁸See Bogdanos, 10; Johnson, 31; Marti, Body 84; Schotter, 30.

¹³⁹See Osgood's introduction to his edition of the poem for a more detailed analysis of stanza construction.

same phrase with which it began--"Perle plesaunte, to prynces paye" (1) and "Ande precious perlez vnto His pay" (1212).

Formally, therefore, the pearl and Pearl maiden are connected with the matter of the text, its physical properties, and the poem itself becomes another term in the metonymic series. White and round, inscribed with the Word of God, pearl and poem both have a tendency to be sublated in service to the transcendent presence even as they manifest that transcendence, calling our attention to its absence. As with the Madonna of Humility and representations of the Queen of Heaven, embodiment remains an issue. Metonymically, the poem connects and interchanges bodies, texts, and textual representations. Before we can understand the poem's reflexive attitude towards this contiguous relationship, we will first look at how the text speaks about bodies, primarily the maiden's and the lamb's, but with Mary curiously allied to both.

The apocryphal texts and cycle dramas have illustrated the potency of Mary's body, with and without its soul, and its imperial powers even in its mothering functions as in the Madonna of Humility or the *vierge ouvranter*. Pearl couples the heavenly functions of the Pearl maiden, the

"bryd"¹⁴⁰ of Christ and "quene in blysse" (415), with those of Mary. But the text allies the two in more ways than in titles. As Alisoun of Bath was a negative double of Mary, the Pearl maiden is, in body and name, a twin of her who was "neuere in two to be twynnand" ("The Death of Mary," York Plays, line 182).¹⁴¹ In his signature study of the poem's allegory, Jefferson B. Fletcher describes the most obvious exegetical ways the poem associates the two characters. He cites the lines "Cum hyder to Me, My lemman swete, / For mote ne spot is non in þe" (763-64) as a Middle English translation of Song of Songs 4:7-8 about the bride from Lebanon (6). Additionally, the image of the white pearl set in gold recalls Richard of Saint's descriptions of the lily-white Virgin's virtues adorning her "quasi aurum" (qtd. in Fletcher 8),¹⁴² virtues the Pearl maiden, "coronde clene in vergynté" (767), shares. In a close study of Richard's De Laudibus Beatae Mariae Virginis, Fletcher finds many

¹⁴⁰Most basically this word means simply "lady" but the poem allies it with "make" (759) and its many forms (e.g. "makelez" in 784), "vyuez" or "wives" (785), and "maryage" (414).

¹⁴¹Morris's glossary for his edition of the poems of the Cotton Nero A X manuscript, including Pearl, makes clear the doubled status of this word, glossing it contextually either as "two" or "separated." Osgood's and Gordon's provide similar glosses.

¹⁴²On the lily as a symbol for the Virgin, see also Hirn, 438-9, and numbers 10 and 31 in Brown.

instances where Mary is described as bedecked with pearls and shining with pearl-like luminescence (11-12). The Pearl maiden seems to be a twin to her who was not to be made into two. But in the same way that Mary repeats tenets of faith to the doubting Joseph and the Man of Law reifies virtue by giving the concept the exemplary body of Constance, another logic becomes apparent: the logic that must use repetition to conceive of its idea of singularity. In the same way that the Eucharist replicates the body of Christ, the Pearl replicates the body of Mary in the Pearl maiden, who herself is replicated exponentially in the poem's final vision when she is in a procession

Of such vergynez in þe same gyse
 Þat watz [the narrator's] blysfyl anvunder croun.
 And coronde wern alle of þe same fasoun,
 Depaynt in perlez and wedez gwyte;
 In vchonez breste watz bounden boun
 Þe blysfyl perle with gret delyt. (1099-1104)

[Of such virgins in the same guise as was the narrator's blissful crowned one, and all were crowned in the same fashion, adorned in pearls and white clothes; on the breast of each one was fixed ready the blissful pearl with great delight.]

All fall at the feet of the lamb in praise. Even the narrator feels "delyt" in gazing on the scene from across the stream (1116 & 1117). The passage operates on the assumption that the lamb is the eschaton of the action, the center of the story and the history of salvation towards which the poem has been progressing all along. However, as

the passage on the matchless pearl illustrates, the lamb is one term in a metonymic series, allied with figuration and physiology.

The Pearl maiden's alliance with Mary is more, then, than just titular and exegetical. Their stories share the bodily foundation of figuration at the same time that their bodies are inscribed by the discourses of salvation and virtue which they legitimize. Like Mary, whose story necessitated she not rot in the earth, the Pearl maiden seems to not be rotting either, although this is something about which the narrator is uncertain at the poem's beginning. He believes his pearl has left him, his "priuy perle withouten spotte" (24) having gone from him, or "fro [him] sprange" (13), in a particular "spote" (13). Now he mourns "To þenke hir color so clad in clot" (22), her "rychez to rot . . . runnen" (26). Later, however, he meets the pearl in all of her expanded, redoubled presence in the magical landscape. Through the blazon of the maiden and her shining white clothes--Stanza group four, lines 181-240--the pearl reappears as the Pearl maiden, embodied for readers as a human character, not a figuration, for the first time. As the metonymic qualities of this scene illustrate, her body is multiplied exponentially by the pearls on it, or that become it, and it foreshadows the multiplicity it will take on in the New Jerusalem at the feet of the lamb.

However, even this immaculate pearl knows the vicissitudes of death. She tells the narrator that his "corse in clot mot calder keue"--"corpse must rot more coldly in the dirt" (320) before he can enter the paradise he sees across the stream. Her own body "in clottez clynge[s]" (857), as does the body of each who "beren pys perle vpon [her] bereste" (854). But of course, this pearl of heaven knows the teleology of her death; it mirrors and depends upon that of the lamb, who was "to be sla3t per lad"--"led to the slaughter there" (801) and overcame sin and death. This point in the story, when the salvational narrative seems so clear and clearly efficacious, however, is one of the most intertextually revealing. The Pearl maiden calls on John's vision of the apocalypse as her authority for what she describes. Within the five stanzas of stanza group fourteen, she invokes this vision, this other text or "trw recorde" (831), four times. John, she says, has his visual apotheosis on the "hyl of Syon pat semly clot"--"hill of Sion, that seemly soil" (789). This "clot" reminds us of the one where the narrator mourns his loss at the poem's beginning and portends the ones that the maiden describes surrounding the bodies of all the Pearl maidens. Most interesting, however, is the connection between this passage, with its teleology and sublation of bodily death, and an earlier passage--the one that began this paragraph--

in which she explains to the narrator that he must be surrounded by clots before he can enter paradise. She continues to explain the reason for this condition:

For hit watz forgarte, at paradys greue;
 Oure 3orefader hit con mysse3eme.
 Bur3 drwry deth boz vch man dreue,
 Er ouer þys dam hym Dry3tyn deme. (321-24)

[For it (the body) was destroyed; in the grove of paradise, our fore-father did misuse it; each man is driven through dreary death before the lord deems him over this stream.]

The maiden later retells the same story, adding the details of how "Oure forme fader"'s biting of the apple "forfete[d]" (639-40) the "delyt" of paradise (642). She also extends this story forward to include the Crucifixion (646), the Harrowing of Hell (651), baptism (653), and the Eucharist (647). She retells the salvational narrative three times, correlating the terms of salvation with those of original sin. By thus inscribing salvation as contiguous with the originary moment of loss, a moment repeated in the narrator's loss of his pearl, the poem calls attention to the slippery potential of generation, procreation. Curiously Eve is absent from these scenes of original sin, but in their focus on inheritance of this already stained body they set the stage for another passage occurring much earlier in the poem. If we return to our first view of Mary in the poem, we again see this emphasis on "erytage" (443), that is, on genealogical serial contiguity. As illustrated by the

"Madonna of Humility" and the *vierge ouvranter*, even when Mary is crowned and enthroned as "emperise" (441) of heaven, the fecundity of her body is never far behind. This picture of her with heaven, earth, and hell in her dominion strains towards the idea of unified and self-identical existence, yet the focus on heritage and its connection to bodily transgressions calls the specter of Eve forth. Her body seems to be the missing term upon which this vision of perfection is based.

The conflicted histories of Mary's conception, birth, motherhood, and death and her relation to Eve must, then, impact the following lines about the Holy Virgin spoken by the narrator: "We calle hyr Fenix of Arraby, / Pat fereles fle3e of hyr Fasor"--"We call her the phoenix of Arabia, that blameless of her form, flew" or "unique from her creator, flew" (430-31). In the Middle Ages the tradition of the phoenix was familiar from both popular and learned writings. For instance, the narrator of Chaucer's Book of the Duchess calls the White Queen the "soleyn fenix of Arabye" (982).¹⁴³ Such citations often emphasize the solitary existence of the bird, just as Mary was, of course, alone of all her sex. Yet the myth of the phoenix from the Metamorphoses, which would have been the most well known

¹⁴³See also lines 15948-64 in Le Roman de la Rose.

form of the story in the period, also emphasizes another aspect of the bird's existence--its singular reproductive capacities. It gives birth only to itself over and over, with only one phoenix existing at any time. This image seems antithetical to Mary's role as gate of heaven, that point of translation between human and divine productive of the salvation of innumerable faithful. As the poem itself has revealed, however, Mary is neither so limitedly reproductive nor so singular. The Pearl maiden, a metonymic reflection of the Holy Virgin, reminds the narrator that it was from Mary that "Jesu con spryng"--"Jesus did spring" (453). Similarly, the poem's subtle emphasis on heritage calls to mind the contiguous nature of sin and salvation, death and life, bodies and immaculate pearls.

In this way, this image of the phoenix focuses the poem's self-reflexive qualities as it undoes the logic of metaphor itself by subtly undermining the notion of categorization. Representations of Mary as the architecture and furniture of heaven, her relationship to Eve, and her inheritance of cultural anxieties about maternity intimate the supplementary nature of flesh and figuration to faith in transcendence. Even in Pearl Mary's body is seemingly comprehended into the telos of the heavenly vision. The Pearl maiden falls on her knees to worship her, calling her

the empress of heaven, but nowhere does the Holy Virgin appear as a character in the plot. In the same speech in which the Pearl maiden prays to her, Mary is replaced by the *corpus mysticum* of lines 457 through 468, which relate the Pauline doctrine of Christians being the limbs of Jesus.¹⁴⁴ During the vision of the New Jerusalem, only portions of her appear: the virginal pearl maidens and the "hy3e trone" on which the lamb sits (1051). It would seem that sublation is complete, that the dangerous supplementarity of flesh and figuration has been put in its proper place in service to the truth of the lamb and his grace.

Yet the poem has taught its readers early on how certain types of figuration do not work, even as it uses the figure of the phoenix. It is this phoenix and her metonymic representative, the Pearl maiden--repeated and diffused as I have shown her to be--that articulate the poem's concomitant logic of transcendence. This metonymy, even mirrored by the poem's own formal characteristics, creates a mystifying web of signification. To prevent readers from becoming lost like the "dased quayle" (1085) the narrator becomes within this web, the poem calls readers' attention to its underlying logic. Returning to an earlier passage will enable me to clarify this point further. In the Pearl maiden's retelling

¹⁴⁴Romans 12:4-5.

of the parable of the pearl of great price, she names God as "pe Fader of folde and flode"--"father of earth and flood" (736), bringing this web to the surface on the levels of letter and word. The metathesis of "folde" and "flode" is remarkable for it calls attention to the part context plays in signification. In the same way that the passage substitutes one body for another in what seems to be a seamless and logical progression, the similarity between these words illustrates the fundamental indeterminacy that underlies language. The same five letters in different serial relation to each other can mean two different things. Their self-identical but reproducible quality and their ability to be cited and translated into other contexts, like Mary's, Constance's, Margaret's and the Pearl maiden's bodies, evidence the divisive consequences of figuration in much the same way as the mistranslation in the Vulgate produced Mary as vanquisher of evil. The Pearl maiden is self-identical, being easily recognizable to the narrator as his pearl when he first sees her.¹⁴⁵ Yet, she is the epitome of multiplicity: her clothes repeat her metonymically; she repeats and is repeated by the "Hundreth powsandez" in the procession of maidens (1107); and she stands in for the body

¹⁴⁵See Marti, "Traditional Characteristics" 315 & 329-32, on aspects of resurrected bodies that would allow them to be individually identified.

of that singular phoenix, Mary, and her offspring, the lamb that is Christ. It is her sameness, stemming from the idea of the unity and plenitude of heaven, that undoes the figure of the Maiden, authorizing yet jeopardizing that very sameness.

The metonymy of the poem, thus, allows us to see the fold in the immaculate pearl, or the ways in which its multiple representations of perfection undermine its purity. The narrator feels some vexation upon looking at the telos of this purity, the New Jerusalem, where his sight can penetrate the walls but his dreamer's body cannot.¹⁴⁶ Driven by "luf-longyng in gret delyt" (1152)¹⁴⁷ upon spotting his "lyttel quene" (1147) among the multitudes in the heavenly city, he attempts to cross the stream that bounds the magical landscape from paradise. Instead of fulfilling his desire to be with his queen, however, he awakens from his dream to find himself in the erber in which he began. Having been specially chosen to experience a vision of ostensible completion and perfection, his desire is still singularly

¹⁴⁶Cf. John 20:19, "On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them . . ."

¹⁴⁷On implications of this term see Aers 67-68 and Bullón-Fernández 45-47. See also line 11 in which the narrator complains of being "for-dolked of luf daungere" or severely wounded by love's danger.

focused, "to maddyng malte"--"to folly dissolved" (1154), on the one facet of that plenitude, and he forfeits it all. His experience marks the dangerous, divisive effects of figuration as he chooses one Pearl maiden and not the whole of the salvational narrative. Yet his story also reminds us of how faith is reproduced through such figuration. As this story ends where it began, it reminds its audience of the bodily existence of faith "in þe forme of bred and wyn / . . . vch a daye" (1209 & 1210) refiguring ceaselessly the Christic body and the narrative of salvation.

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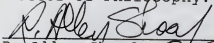
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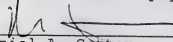
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Teresa P. Reed was born in Livingston, Alabama, a small town in the west-central portion of the state. She earned her A.B. in English from Birmingham-Southern College and her M.A. in English from the University of Virginia prior to attending the University of Florida. When she is not thinking about Marian figuration, Teresa spends her time doing cultural studies research and baking sweets.

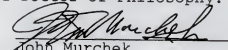
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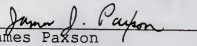
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Daniel A. Cottom
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Assistant Professor of
English

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